

Common Characteristics of Gifted Underachievers **A Guide for Parents**

If you have concerns about the performance of your gifted child in school, know that you're not alone. This guide is intended to define some common characteristics of gifted underachievers and to offer some answers to common questions related to gifted underachieving. While there is no agreed upon definition of gifted underachievement, many experts describe it as a significant, sustained discrepancy between ability and potential. Many gifted underachievers *may* display one or more of the characteristics listed here:

Some of the Common Characteristics

- A child may have lower than expected academic self-perceptions
- A child may often struggle with self-efficacy skills
- A child may regularly demonstrate low levels of self-motivation and exhibit low levels of effort in academic tasks
- A child may have negative attitudes toward school, teachers, and/or learning
- A child may struggle to self-regulate or have limited metacognitive skills

Common Questions

Q: My gifted student is highly motivated and gets fairly good grades, but his standardized test scores are surprisingly low. Is he an underachiever and should I be concerned?

A: Standardized test scores are only one measure we use to determine giftedness. Not all gifted students excel on standardized assessments. However, you may want to discuss your concerns with the classroom teacher or gifted specialist. We may suggest a screening to see if a learning disability is making it difficult for your child to demonstrate his knowledge on standardized assessments.

Q: I have several kids in the gifted program, but my son is the only one I'm concerned about. Are boys more likely to be underachievers at school or might he just be a different type of student?

A: Actually, boys are more likely to be recognized as gifted underachievers (about twice as likely). It's not completely clear why this is the case, but if you have concerns about your son they are certainly worth sharing with his teachers.

Q: What can I do at home to promote and encourage achievement?

A: Work to maintain a positive, supportive home environment. Be consistent and kind with your children. Set reasonable boundaries and fair rules. Model cooperative behaviors and equitable conversations with your spouse and encourage them in your child. Also, remember that even though your child is intellectually advanced, he is not an adult. He may not be ready for adult responsibilities and conversations.

Q: I feel like some of my daughter's friends have become a bad influence on her. She seems

less motivated and interested in school. Should I be concerned?

A: Friends can certainly have an influence (positive and negative) on achievement. Kids care about what their friends think and how they are perceived by their peers. It is unlikely that certain friendships are the sole cause of your daughter's underachievement, but they might contribute to her lack of motivation or negative attitude toward school.

Q: I've had some disagreements with my child's teacher. Could those disagreements contribute to her underachievement?

A: It's possible. Sometimes gifted students hear conflicting messages and use those conflicts to justify producing low quality work. Stay in contact with your child's teacher and try to come together on areas where you might disagree. It's important that your child gets a consistent message at school and home. Your daughter should know that you and her teachers want what's best for her and are working together to make sure that she's challenged, motivated, and able to succeed.

Q: My son is a procrastinator and often doesn't do his best on challenging assignments. He's proud of the fact that he's in the gifted program, but I rarely see him demonstrate his capabilities in his work. Does this mean he's a gifted underachiever?

A: Potentially. Your son may be nervous about underperforming and not succeeding. Some gifted students use procrastination as a reason for sub-par products. He may recognize and appreciate his abilities, but not view his effort as a part of his intelligence. Gifted underachievers may have a fear of failure, may not connect with the content in a meaningful way, or may not feel supported. If some of these qualities describe your son, you may want to talk with his teacher or the gifted specialist.

What do I do?

So what can you do if your child exhibits the qualities of a gifted underachiever? First, make sure to communicate your concerns to your child's teacher and the gifted specialist. Also, know that while there is no one-size-fits-all fix, there are some strategies that may help to encourage achievement. Some possible interventions include:

- greater student-teacher interaction (developing trust)
- more cognitive complexity and academic choice
- develop learning experiences that make school meaningful (tied to student interests)
- conversations to help students see the importance of school (connected to future goals and learning)
- connecting students with achieving peers in the classroom (encouraging their collaboration)

Source of Information:

Callahan, C.M. & Hertberg-Davis, H.L. (Eds.). (2013). *Fundamentals of gifted education: Considering multiple perspectives*. NY: Routledge.