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What Is Underachievement?

This nation searches continually for better ways to educate its children. National studies and blue-ribbon commissions routinely report depressing statistics about children's lack of basic skills, inadequate knowledge of science, inept critical thinking, and poor problem-solving abilities, as well as lack of readiness for post–high school education or the workforce. The U.S. Office of Education reports that 40 percent of the students in the top 5 percent of high school graduating classes are not graduating from college.[1] The College Board announces that it is recentering the average score for its Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs). Studies find that between 10 and 20 percent of high school dropouts are in the superior range of abilities.[2]

The problems have been blamed on such villains as television, the economy, breakdown of the family, large classes, school busing, lack of racial integration, not enough class time, shortages of funds, and poor discipline. Education professionals complicate the discussion by use of such inside jargon as "cultural deprivation," "learning disabled," "tracking," "test bias," "cooperative education," "Chapter I," "bilingual education," and "inclusion." The endless controversy can be bewildering to the average parent who may not also be an educator, as well as for the educator who truly wants to teach children.

All these debates about why American children don't learn as well as they should ignore a most basic issue. Even if we add time to the school day; give new titles to federal funding; increase teacher salaries; reduce class sizes; label and fund children as "learning disabled," "having special needs," or "attention deficit disordered"; and change tests to reflect

differences in cultural environments and learning styles, we are not facing a central problem in our schools. Millions of children who have no actual learning inabilities—children with average, above-average, and even gifted intellectual abilities, including those from homes where education is valued—are simply not performing up to their capabilities. Their true capabilities are obvious to both their teachers and their parents. They may be very creative or verbally or mathematically precocious, yet despite their abilities, they do not perform well in school.

These children suffer from *Underachievement Syndrome* and are called *underachievers*. Underachievers sit in every classroom and live in many families. They waste educational resources, try the patience of even the best teachers, manipulate their families toward chaos, and destroy their own confidence and sense of personal control. It is time for families and schools to recognize this basic problem.

Parents everywhere can recognize the symptoms of Underachievement Syndrome. When I appeared for a five-minute interview on NBC-TV's *Today* show, covering the topic of gifted underachieving children, that one segment attracted more than twenty thousand phone calls and thousands of letters from distressed parents from all over the country. (See Figure 1.1.)

What is Underachievement Syndrome and what causes it? There is no gene for underachievement—no neurological or biological explanation for inadequate school performance by capable children. Nor can we find in the educational institution a particular cause for their underachievement, for there are many other children with similar abilities who achieve well in the same classrooms. They seem not to have learned the process of achievement: in fact, these underachievers have *learned* to underachieve. If they don't listen, read, study, or complete assignments in school or after school, how can they be achieving?

Underachievers usually begin as apparently bright and often very verbal preschoolers, but at some point their enthusiasm for learning and their satisfactory school performance change—gradually for some, suddenly and dramatically for others. The change in their achievement pattern can be easily seen by comparing their year-to-year achievement test scores. Percentile scores are stable while children are in an achieving mode, but they decline steadily when the children enter the underachieving mode. There are other more apparent indicators. The most

Figure 1.1

Excerpts from *Today* Show Viewers' Letters

New York:

My youngest son is a freshman at SUNY Oswego College and is going through a very difficult time. He is at an emotional low and has called us for help. We are not sure what to do for him.

North Carolina:

My son, an 11th grader, is a gifted student and having a lot of problems this year. I'm afraid he is throwing away all his chances for the future.

Florida:

Zachary is 5 years old and in kindergarten. He's been reading since he was two years of age. However, I am concerned with his behavior. He gives up very easily. Sometimes he'll throw a pencil. Zachary also demands attention and excessive praise, which is not easy to deliver to one child in a class of 27 children.

Tennessee:

My son, Kevin, was told he would be in the school's Academic Olympics. Since he isn't doing his work, his teacher is considering sending someone else in his place. He cried about it because he wants very much to be a part of this. He claims he tries, but he just cannot seem to get assignments turned in.

Iowa:

Our son is definitely experiencing all the problems you mentioned. Jerod is 16 and had a 90th percentile in all his basic skills tests. He's getting Ds and Fs in every academic subject. He had to repeat sophomore English because he just would not turn in assignments. He just does not do homework at all.

Texas:

I have a college student who was a National Merit Scholar who is on scholastic probation because she hasn't a clue about what studying entails. The process is foreign to her since she floated through high school. She is quite devastated, and we really don't know how to teach her to study.

Pennsylvania:

My daughter is 18, has 1340 on her SATs and is getting C and D minuses in her post-graduate year.

Idaho:

I am interested in where I can read more about the topic of gifted kids who don't hand in papers, stop going to classes in college, etc. Sounds like you have met my son, recently readmitted to Middlebury College (VT) for his "last chance."

obvious warning is the direct communication from teachers that these children are not working to their abilities. Parents also observe their children's disinterest and detachment from the school learning process.

What are the characteristics of children with Underachievement Syndrome? Underachievers tend to be disorganized. They dawdle. They forget homework, lose assignments, and misplace books; they daydream, don't listen, look out the window, or talk too much to other children. They have poor study skills, or none. They consider themselves to have studied if they've briefly read the material while lying on their beds and watching TV with headsets on. Some are slow and perfectionistic, and they may say that if they finish their work it will probably be wrong anyway. On the other hand, some will complete their assignments quickly but are much more concerned about being finished first than about doing quality work. Their papers have so many careless errors that one wonders if they gave any thought to the assignment at all. Perhaps their goals are only to finish before recess or the end of the school day.

Some underachieving children are lonely and withdrawn. They don't seem to want any friends. They may cry, whine, and complain, or they may be teased and tormented by their peers. Others are bossy and lose their tempers easily. Some are aggressive and may start playground fights. If underachievers show any interest in school, it is related to their social life or sports. They may select one subject or teacher they like, but in general, they describe school as "boring."

Some never read books, while others immerse themselves in reading as an escape. They especially like to read when they are supposed to be doing homework or some household chore. Television, computers, or video games may serve as alternative escapes, and conveniently, they rarely hear a parent calling when staring at the screen or playing video games.

Some underachievers are literal and concrete in their thinking and apparently cannot solve abstract problems at all, while others display very creative and unusual thinking. The creative underachievers may have many and unusual ideas but rarely bring their ideas to closure. They seem unable to complete what they begin. Some creative underachievers immerse themselves so completely in a chosen project that little

else is attended to, and they fall behind in all their other school responsibilities.

Underachievers are unconsciously manipulative, some less obviously than others. They may overtly attempt to manipulate parent against parent, teacher against parent, parent against teacher, or friend against friend. Covertly they may manipulate parents to do much of their homework for them or teachers to postpone deadlines or give them more assistance or less challenging assignments.

What do underachievers say about their school problems? They have innumerable defenses. School is "boring" when they are young, "irrelevant" when they are older. The boredom or irrelevance is constant and tends to be unrelated to the actual assignments. The poor grades, which they say don't matter, are typically blamed on "terrible teachers." They think drama, sports, music, or having a social life is more important than schoolwork. "Who wants to be a geek anyway?" they retort. They sometimes claim they don't have the ability to do better and that the tests must be wrong. They call achievement their parents' goal, not theirs, and blame their problems on unfair comparisons with sisters or brothers or unfair pressures by their parents. They excuse themselves from making an effort by saying that they'd rather not do the work at all than do it less than perfectly. Sometimes they complain that they are putting themselves under too much pressure and probably shouldn't expect so much of themselves.

Underlying the poor study habits, weak skills, disorganization, and defenses is a feeling of lack of personal control over their educational success. Underachievers don't really believe that they can achieve their goals even if they work harder. They may readily acknowledge that their lack of effort is the cause of the problem. However, after exploring further, they are likely to admit that they would need to make considerably more effort to achieve their high goals, and even then they're not certain they could achieve them. Effort might make a small difference, but small differences are not enough and not worth the investment and risk. They set their goals either too high or too low, and as a result they guarantee failure. They want to be millionaires, professional football or baseball players, rock stars, Olympic gymnasts, or presidents, and they have magical ideas about the efforts necessary to arrive at

these unrealistic goals. They may say such things as "If a person works hard enough they can achieve any goal they set," but they have not yet discovered what the word *work* actually means. They understand it as having a romantic and mystical air that is closer to fun and action than to the persevering effort that is required for achievement. They cannot build firm self-confidence because they have not learned a real sense of effort.

Children cannot build confidence by accomplishing only easy tasks. They already know that anyone can accomplish these tasks. It is when children accept the risk of struggle, and they find they can accomplish that which they didn't think was possible, that they begin to build self-confidence. It is from actual achievement that one develops a strong self-concept. Underachievers have denied themselves the opportunity to build confidence because they direct their energies toward avoiding the relationship between process and outcome, between effort and achievement.

Ours is a competitive society, and families and schools are competitive. Underachievers have highly competitive feelings but it may not be obvious. They aspire to be winners, and they are poor losers. If they don't believe they can win, they may quit before they begin, or they may select only the school experiences in which they are certain of victory. They are competitive, internally pressured children who have not learned to cope with defeat.

It is not possible to be productive in our society or in our schools until one learns to cope with competition. Coping with competition requires understanding that winning and losing are always temporary. It is a fallacy for parents and teachers to believe that they can create home and school environments in which children can always succeed. Children who learn to lose without being devastated and use failure experiences to grow will achieve in the classroom and in society. Children who can lose without feeling like losers are discovering the key to positive growth. Our goals should not be schools without failure, only schools without children who feel like failures.

Even as schools try to make classrooms more cooperative, they will not be able to extinguish a basic competitive motivation that pervades society. Children should certainly learn to cooperate, but they must also learn to win graciously and lose courageously.

Learning to compete effectively is central to achievement in school. Underachievers have not internalized this basic competitive message. Instead, they manipulate their families and school environments in fear of failure. They learn to avoid competition unless they can win, and in the process they miss important skills. As their underachievement cycle continues, they feel less and less capable. Their fear of failure increases. Their sense of efficacy decreases. They and their parents feel helpless and hopeless as the skills gap between where they are and where they should be widens menacingly. The cycle continues downward in a spiral that perpetuates the problem. Underachievement Syndrome adversely affects the child—and often the entire family. It feeds on itself and grows until something or someone either deliberately or spontaneously intervenes to reverse the cycle.

In unplanned interventions, teachers, friends, mentors, or other important people may be the catalysts that help underachievers begin to build confidence. In some cases, they serve as models for underachievers. In others, it is their support that is most critical. Because typically these underachievers often have the potential for high achievement, they may take great leaps in the skills they develop for their new roles. Examples of "underachievers turned superachievers" are the unimpressive classmates one remembers from high school who return to their ten-year high school reunions with high-level college degrees or impressive careers. They are confident and successful, and one wonders how someone who appeared to lack high ability could accomplish so much. They are often termed "late bloomers."

Unfortunately, only a small percentage of "late bloomers" emerge from their latent states to develop their talents. Society includes many who continue their downward cycle to become high school and college dropouts. If they manage to remain in school until graduation, they show only marginal achievement and have little interest in learning. They join the workforce of underachievers and lead lives in which they drastically underuse their abilities to their own frustration and to society's loss. Their lifestyles take on "easy-way-out" patterns, or they move through adulthood realizing that they should have lived differently but feel helpless about changing.

You, as parents and teachers, can do something about underachievement. You will be able to do this better if you learn why bright kids get

poor grades. You can accomplish most if you work with each other. If you suspect you have an underachiever in your family or in your classroom, this book will help you to recognize and deal with your underachiever's problems.

Parent Pointer & Teacher Tip

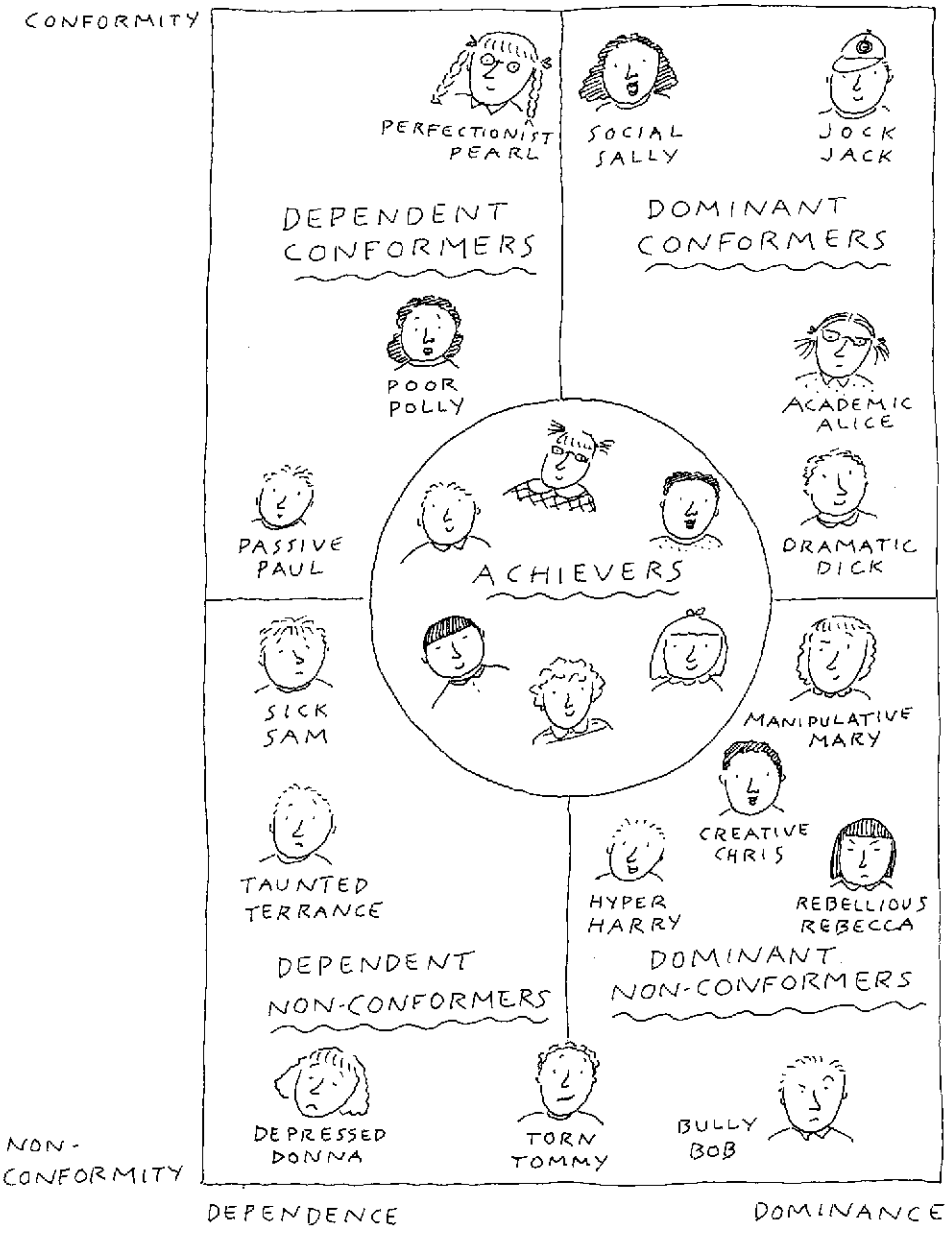
First, try to **identify your type of underachiever**. Then look further for the family and school pattern that may have shaped the underachievement style. Finally, try those recommendations that will help you to reverse the underachievement cycle at home and at school. Be realistic: it is usually easier to identify your underachiever and the family/school pattern than to change them, so plan for patience and perseverance. You may not be able to (or wish to) change every error you uncover, but even small improvements will be gratifying. A sense of achievement for your children and for underachievers in your classroom will build their self-confidence. Children who don't seem to care about school and grades can be motivated to learn and achieve by parents and teachers who understand the underlying causes of their problems. Underachievers can master the skills that will enable them to cope with competition in our society and, therefore, can be free to experience the joy of self-motivated learning and accomplishment.

What Do Underachievers Look Like?

Underachievers come in many varieties, and although they are truly individual, they often fit into prototypical categories. In real life the prototypes are not pure in any one child but are blended. However, the descriptions in this chapter will help you to determine if your child or student has Underachievement Syndrome. Figure 1.2 can help you to visualize your child's prototypical category.

If you're not sure your child is an underachiever, think about the last parent-teacher conference you attended. Consider your child as you see him or her at home. Compare your child with the children that are described below. If some of these descriptions remind you of your child at home or students in your classroom, it is likely that they have Underachievement Syndrome.

Figure 1.2
Catagories of Underachievement



Perfectionist Pearl

Neat, tidy papers. Neat, tidy desk.
Perfectionist Pearl always does her best.
Handwriting's A, Spelling's OK
But Pearl can't get her work done today.

Today, Mrs. Jones has assigned an original story. The other children started twenty minutes ago, but Pearl doesn't have a word down on her paper, not even a title. Finally, she raises her hand timidly. "Mrs. Jones," she whines, "I just don't know what to write about." Mrs. Jones is perplexed. Why is Pearl, who is so bright, who completes workbook pages so perfectly, and who uses impeccable grammar, unable to think of a topic for a one-page story? Mrs. Jones makes several suggestions, and Pearl listens quietly. Tears glaze her eyes, and she explains, "Mrs. Jones, I don't see how I can write a story if I can't find a perfect topic."

Pearl's problems have just begun. In third grade she is still a very fine student. As long as her work assignments are concrete and specific, she performs well. However, when she needs to think abstractly, to come to conclusions based on reasoning, to originate her own ideas, or to take a small risk, she is paralyzed by fear of failure. Her grades and confidence begin their decline in middle school. Gifted Pearl, who began school at the top, moves steadily toward classroom mediocrity.

At home Pearl's room is neat. She is obedient. She causes no problems. She is the perfect child—until adolescence. Adolescence brings a strange rebellion. Anger, eating disorders, and feelings of depression appear. Pearl searches for ways to control a small part of her life perfectly, because, for Pearl, the alternative to perfection is failure. She sets impossibly high standards and feels helpless in her search for success.

Passive Paul

Paul slouches at his desk. He yawns, daydreams, meanders through math. His assignments are rarely complete and, if they are, never completed well. He raises his hand to ask questions, but not to answer them. When called upon, he gives nonresponses such as "I don't know" or "I'm not sure" or "I don't understand" or "I forgot." He is a likable,

pleasant, "good kid" who just doesn't get his work done but never seems to worry about it. "He can't seem to concentrate," the teacher says. "Perhaps Paul needs Ritalin," (a medication for those with attention deficit disorder) his parents wonder.

> "I'm doing much better now, Mom," Paul says with confidence.
>
> "Yes, I have all my homework done," he says, bending the truth reassuringly.
>
> "Gee, I'm sorry I got that F; I'll do better next time," he tearfully apologizes. "My mind just wanders."

Paul's homework is rarely done. Books and assignments don't come home for study, and grades continue downward in a never-ending plunge toward failure.

Unmoved and unmoving, Paul passively withdraws to the television screen. He is immobile and unresponsive when his mother calls him to his homework. He stares intently at the TV as her normally quiet tone escalates. He blinks his eyes as Mother's shouts pervade the room. Finally, when Mother screams in desperation, he apologizes for not hearing and asks what she'd like him to do. When she suggests homework, he lies assuringly and says that his homework is all complete and retreats to the screen in further absorption.

Mother, frustrated and despondent, is reassured by Dad that Paul must certainly have done his homework, so "why not let him watch TV?" Thus, they, too, settle comfortably in front of the screen—until the next teacher conference.

Sick Sam

> MOM: Sammy, are you up yet? Time to wake up. Time for school.
> SAM: (Silence)
> MOM: (5 minutes later) Sammy, it's past time to get up. You'll miss the bus.
> SAM: (Weakly) Mom . . .
> MOM: Yes, dear, what is it?
> SAM: Mom, I don't feel so good—got a bellyache.
> MOM: Sammy, your stomach hurts again? Maybe you shouldn't

have eaten that pizza. Try to get up and walk around a little. You might feel better.

SAM: (More weakly) But Mom, it hurts so much I can't move!

MOM: All right. I guess you'd better stay in bed. Go back to sleep. It must be your allergy.

Sam spends the morning in his bed, but by eleven he's up and feels much better. Mom cooks him a "nice wholesome lunch" and keeps him company as they sit at the kitchen table. They chat and giggle, and she assures him that he's a wonderful, talented boy, and if he could only stay well she's sure he could be an A student. Sam agrees and laments on how hard it is to keep up with schoolwork because he's missed so much school. He protests to Mom, "It just doesn't seem fair that the teachers pile on all that make-up work. How do they expect me ever to catch up?" Mom sympathizes and assures Sam that she'll talk to his teachers about the problem. "Don't worry, Sammy," she comforts. "Just stay well. Why don't you go in the living room now and relax and watch television?" And Sam does.

At two o'clock the telephone rings. The principal, Mrs. Smart, is on the line. She expresses concern about Sam's frequent absences. Mother details Sammy's maladies, his allergies, his asthma attacks, and his digestive problems. Mrs. Smart explains to Sammy's mother how these illnesses may be psychosomatic and that they could be caused by tension. She suggests finding out the reasons for Sam's pressures. Sam smirks to himself as he snuggles under the afghan, watching his favorite soap, and listens to his mom's response.

"Mrs. Smart," she blusters, "if those teachers would just stop giving my Sammy so much homework, maybe he could relax a little and feel better." But although Mom sounds convincing on the telephone, she can't help but wonder to herself if Sammy is really sick.

Taunted Terrance

Terrance is a fag, Terrance is gay,
Push him down, beat him up,
Don't let him play!

Notice Terrance on the playground. He wanders alone, watches the ball game, and maybe talks to other kids, but he usually leaves the

group after being teased or taunted. There is nothing different about his sexual orientation. Indeed he hasn't thought much about sex. The boys, however, continue to tease. He says he doesn't have any friends but really doesn't want any. After school each day he sits at the kitchen table with Mom, whining and complaining about the "mean kids at school." Mom seems to understand and wishes that the teachers would protect poor Terrance or that the kids wouldn't be so mean. Dad says that Terrance needs to learn to play baseball. He tries to teach sports to Terrance but ends each attempt with angry scolding. The ritual is also punctuated by Terrance's return to Mom with complaints that "Dad doesn't understand me." A mom-and-dad brouhaha terminates most father-and-son activities. Dad gives up, and Mom wonders why Dad doesn't do better with her son. She feels sure that Terrance's real problems are caused by the school or the other kids.

In school, Terrance doesn't finish assignments. He works slowly, daydreams, and sometimes brings his work home to finish with Mom's help. He works at the kitchen table so that Mom may alternate stirring the soup with doing fourth grade math. Terrance may manage to do a few problems on his own, but he doesn't really see how he can do any work without his mom. When she's not home, he doesn't even start. "Why try?" he thinks to himself. He needs help. Mom must tell him what to do. Big sister should protect him from the kids at school. Why do the kids pick on him all the time? Why is he so weak and small? Why can't he do anything on his own?

"Don't give up, Terrance. Try the computer." And Terrance does. Terrance loves the computer, and the keyboard doesn't require social conversation. Terrance can control the computer. It responds predictably. Everyone knows that Terrance is terrific with the computer, and although all agree that he is somewhat weird, Terrance is at last a hero! His assignments continue uncompleted unless they are related to the computer.

Torn Tommy

Today is Tuesday. Tommy was at his dad's last night. He looks a little sleepy and a bit more rumpled than yesterday. Wednesday will be another bad day, but Thursday and Friday will be better. Next week Tom will also have two sleepy days, but we're not certain which days. The

two visitation days vary from week to week. Other things change for Tommy too:

> At Dad's house the family has fun; at Mom's house he has to do homework and chores.
>
> At Dad's house he does his homework in front of the TV; at Mom's house he has to work at his desk in his room.
>
> At Dad's house he can stay up with his dad and Dad's girlfriend until he gets tired; at Mom's house, his bedtime is 8:30.
>
> At Dad's house he takes exciting vacation trips; at Mom's house it's boring.
>
> At Dad's house no one makes him study; at Mom's house he listens to nonstop sermons on the importance of schoolwork.

Dad often calls Mom. They argue on the telephone. Tommy hates it when they ask him where he wants to be for Christmas. If he chooses Dad, the gifts will be bigger, but Mom will be sad. If he chooses Mom, Dad says he won't be mad, but inside Tommy knows he will be angry. Tommy wishes he didn't have to choose.

Tommy loves his mom and dad, and every night he prays they'll get back together. If they don't, he wonders if maybe he ought to move in with Dad. After all, when he grows up he wants to be a man like his dad and have fun. There isn't much sense in study, study, study anyway. Just when Tommy thinks he has things all figured out and is about to say to Mom that he'd like to move for a while, he finds her in the kitchen crying. She says she's so lonely, and she wishes Tommy would be happy at her house. Then Tommy feels sad and feels sorry for her, and he knows he can't leave her. He assures her that he'll try to be good and to help her. He shuffles up to his room, slouches at his desk, and stares distantly at his math book, wondering if other kids feel as mixed up as he does.

Jock Jack, Social Sally, and Dramatic Dick

Captain of the football team, blue-ribbon swimmer, first-chair trumpet soloist, star of the school play, or chairperson of student council, Jack, Sally, and Dick share similar characteristics. They thrive in competitive activities and are personable and socially adept as well. They are natural

athletes, charismatic actors, talented musicians, or excellent leaders. They seem to be propelled toward success. As high school seniors, they give their parents great joy. At the athletic, music, or drama awards banquet, parents and children alike feel pride as they experience the thrill of receiving awards for excellent contributions to the team, drama club, band, or student council. Why is this a problem? Actually, it may not be, but one needs to look carefully—because the senior high awards banquet may represent the peak achievement of these young persons' careers.

Why are they underachievers? These young people who are the pride of their teams and their families may have reached the high point of their lives at that senior banquet, despite the special talent and competitive spirit that has served them so well. If you look carefully at their activity selections, you may discover that they participate only in activities in which they are winners. They select sports if they will be captains, drama if they will be stars, band if they will play first chair, and social activities if they can be leaders. Although they actually have excellent scholastic potential (they must be bright, how else could they learn all the lines for the play), they claim that schoolwork has never provided a satisfactory competitive challenge; however, it may actually have provided too much competitive challenge. They didn't select academics because their drive to win, encouraged first by their parents and then internalized, automatically eliminated activities in which they could not attain "first place." They became just average students because they did not see themselves as winners in academics.

Now as they graduate to life after high school, they may join a traveling drama troupe, organize a musical group, or go to college to play football, but they will discover that hundreds of "stars" are competing with them and they are no longer outstanding. Worse, their history of academic underachievement has narrowed their career options. They will wander and search. If they are fortunate, they may find a community, a career field, or a school environment in which they can again be stars—big fish in little ponds. If they do find such a haven, they may be successful; if they do not find a niche that accepts their leadership, they flounder and dissipate their many undeveloped talents. They always remember how high school represented the best years of their lives.

Academic Alice

Alice is extraordinarily gifted, with an IQ of 150. She learned spontaneously to read when she was three years old. She did double-digit addition in her head by age four. Her extensive vocabulary and high-level reasoning captivated and entertained adult friends and relatives. "Surely she's a genius," they declared.

A four-point average, honors classes, and first-place ranking in her small-town graduating class of two hundred established Alice as an achiever. At graduation ceremonies she received awards, honors, and scholarships. There was no doubt about Alice's bright future. She was university bound and planned a career in medicine.

Alice has shown no signs of Underachievement Syndrome. How did she get into this book? Let's look further. She's a freshman now at a prestigious eastern university, taking her premed classes—chemistry, calculus, biology, and English literature. There are four to five hundred students in each of her lectures, and many of them also ranked first in their graduating classes. Some have had two years of chemistry, calculus, and advanced biology before they entered. Alice wonders, "How do they know so much? They seem so much brighter than I. How can I compete?" Her fears are confirmed with her first exam grade, which is a B instead of the usual and expected A.

"Why do I feel so depressed?" she wonders. "After all, a B is a good grade, and there's plenty of time to bring it up to an A." Alice resolves to study harder. She spends many hours preparing for the second exam. However, she finds it difficult to concentrate on the course content. She feels tense at the thought of the test and is obsessed with worries of how she will perform. Nevertheless, she is reasonably confident that she has mastered the information—until the morning of the exam. As she stares at the first question, the words blur. She feels nauseous. She can't remember ever seeing that concept. Could she have missed it entirely? "Relax, Alice," she tells herself as she skips down the page to look at the other questions. Some she feels confident about; others she knows she has studied but is not sure of the answers. Fifteen minutes have passed, and Alice hasn't marked a single answer on her paper. "Can anyone see how nervous I am?" she wonders. "So this is test anxiety," she concludes, and then determinedly begins responding in the best way

she can. She's run out of time and has five more questions to go. "Darn." She slumps in her chair. "That's probably a B again! Oh, well, I guess in college I'm a B student."

Five days later the test grades are returned. She has a C—the first C in her entire school history. She expected an A or at least a B+. How can she tell Mom about this? How can she get into medical school? Maybe she isn't as bright as they told her. Her friends are getting A's—what's happened? She'll study harder next time. The material is so complex. It seems so irrelevant. "How will calculus make me a good physician?" she asks herself. "What a stupid way to select doctors! Why am I here? Should I quit? Should I change my major? My parents will be so disappointed; they'll never understand. How can I have become such a failure? Failure . . . failure . . . failure . . ."

What happens to Alice as the tension builds? There are certainly many possible outcomes, some positive and some negative depending on how creatively she handles her dilemma. Alice may adjust to the tension and bring her grades back up to A's. She may learn to live as a B student and continue her medical direction. She may find that she's an A student in psychology or literature and that she prefers an entirely different career than the one she originally selected. There are also less favorable outcomes—dropping out of college, psychological and psychosomatic illnesses, and in a few cases, that most distressing final solution, suicide.

Alice was an achiever, and her Underachievement Syndrome came late in her education. Young adulthood is a difficult time in which to deal with competition and with one's first losing experiences. Alice feels alone with her problem.

Manipulative Mary

MARY: Ms. Smith, you know that D you gave me in math? Do you suppose you could "up it" just a little? I'm afraid to go home. I've never had a D before. My father will kill me! I promise I'll work harder next quarter.

MS. SMITH: (Thoughtfully) Mary seems so worried and frightened. I wonder if her dad will beat her. She did promise to do better next quarter. I guess I could give her one more chance. (To Mary) Well,

I guess I could change it to C– if you're sure you'll get all your homework done next quarter.

MARY: I promise. Thank you so much, Ms. Smith. I really do appreciate your kindness. Yes, I will try harder. Gee, you really saved me!

The next quarter Mary does a repeat performance. Can her dad really be so mean? As a matter of fact, Mary twists Dad around her little finger too. Although occasionally he or Mom catch on to Mary, they rather enjoy her charming persuasiveness and can't really say no to her. She is a good, sweet kid who is helpful and obliging, and it just may be, they admit, that they spoil her just a bit. She's always had lots of toys and clothes, and, no, they really can't think of anything she has wanted that she hasn't received. Mary's requests for possessions are endless, and her specific "need" for designer labels is becoming outrageous.

Mary's social life at school is a significant priority for her compared to her study habits. She chatters incessantly and buzzes around the playground from friend to friend. Despite her apparent conversational ease and sophisticated appearance, her friendship circle is unstable. Her peers avoid close alignments to protect themselves from being overwhelmed and manipulated.

Ms. Smith wonders why Mary is so insecure. "It must be that her parents are mean," she reasons.

Mom wonders why Mary is so insecure. "It must be that the other kids are jealous," she believes.

Dad wonders why Mary is so insecure. "It may be that school is too demanding," he concludes.

They all resolve to provide Mary with extra affection to compensate for her poor self-concept. Mary manipulates on.

Creative Chris

"School is boring. What's the purpose in teaching me to read and do workbook pages at this simplistic level when I'm capable of reading far above it?" Chris challenges his third grade teacher. She can tell he's going to be a problem. She must keep him busy. She assigns more workbook pages. Chris schemes and plans. "How can I avoid all this dull stuff?" He slows his work. He daydreams. He creates reasons why

he should not have so many assignments. He brings his rationale home to Mom and persuades her to go to school to argue for him. She becomes his advocate. He is now excused from his assignments. He can read a library book instead, but he must stay out of trouble. That wasn't exactly what Chris or Mom had in mind for academic challenge, but it seemed better than "busywork."

Chris reads extensively and continuously. When there are chores assigned at home, Chris is reading. When the teacher explains math, Chris hears only half the lesson because the book on his lap absorbs the other half of his attention. His literature teacher expects eight book reports each year. Chris reads thirty books but does not complete a single report.

"Chris," Mom queries, "you enjoy reading so much, why won't you write those book reports?"

"Because, Mom," Chris retorts, "I shouldn't waste good reading time writing the obvious. My teacher knows I've read the books. I see no reason to give her written proof."

"Yes, I guess that does make sense," Mom acknowledges.

By sixth grade Chris and his teachers are in full battle. Chris will not do his assignments. His teachers insist on giving him poor grades. Chris argues that he knows the work and can pass every test, and he does. His exam grades are B's and C's without any effort. His teacher averages these with F's for his missing assignments, and so his report card shows C's and D's.

As Chris's psychologist I ask, "Chris, can you explain why you're doing so poorly in school when you are so capable and are so interested in learning?"

"I could get A's if I made the effort. I just don't care about grades," he defends himself.

"Chris, are you sure you could get A's if you put forth the effort?" I question further.

A silence follows.

"No, I guess I'm not sure—probably only B's. I start to listen to the teacher explain the math and it seems so easy and boring, so I get back into my book. Then I guess I must miss some small explanation so that when I look at my homework assignment, I'm not sure I understand it. I feel too dumb to ask questions because maybe the teacher explained it

while I was reading, so I just don't do the math. By now, I suppose there are quite a few gaps, so maybe I could only get a B. I usually get a C with no work, so why should I bother? Even when I do make the effort, the teacher doesn't notice. I guess C's are good enough. It's more important to learn and be creative than to get good grades anyway."

And Mom agrees. Chris is just too gifted and creative for typical schools.

In addition to Chris's vast reading experiences, he writes poetry and short stories. He adds unique comments to classroom discussions and delights in drawing original cartoons. However, he is determined not to conform, and so he receives little academic credit for his creative contributions. His mom says, "He has always marched to the beat of a different drummer."

Rebellious Rebecca

Rebecca's bedroom door is locked. She has closed herself off from her parents. She no longer wants to hear their scolding, their reprimands, their continuous criticisms. In her determinedly messy bedroom, her telephone, stereo, and journal writing are outlets for the anger she feels toward her parents, her teachers, the counselor, and the rest of the whole adult world. Sometimes she gets depressed and feels alone, as though she has no goals or purpose. Her friends, her smoking, and her drinking may help her to push away her feeling of emptiness temporarily. She doesn't know what she's for, but knows for certain what she's against. She labels her parents' way of life as narrow, empty, and hypocritical. "You should see the way they really are," she complains to the "shrink" to whom they've sent her.

In school, her once consistently good grades vacillate between A's and F's. She tells the guidance counselor that "school is irrelevant" and asks, "Why should I bother studying English grammar since I'll never use it anyway?" She definitely sees no purpose in going on to college. She works well for the teachers she likes, but proclaims: "I can't get along with Mrs. Smith, the Spanish teacher, because she doesn't like me no matter what I do." So there isn't much sense in studying Spanish. The number of teachers she dislikes has increased each year.

At the last dance Rebecca seemed drunk or high. She was with Social Sam, the student council president. They are a nice couple and seem so

right for each other. Why do her parents feel uncomfortable about their relationship? Rebecca says she has finally found someone who really loves her. By junior year she is pregnant. That may be followed by marriage, single parenting, or just as likely, abortion. The smoking, drinking, drugs, and "sleeping around" alternately feel to her like expressions of her individuality and her desperation. Her Underachievement Syndrome seems minor in the constellation of much more difficult problems.

Hyperactive Harry

Harry is disorganized, sloppy, and has nonstop high energy. In school he's out of his seat continuously—touching, tapping, slapping other children. His schoolwork is not completed. Some papers may make it home; others mysteriously disappear into a messy school desk, messy locker, or messy book bag. He listens to his teacher sporadically and tunes out instructions, rules, and threats and warnings. Mysteriously, he clearly hears praise and rewards and messages that relate to food or recess time. His handwriting is illegible, and his math problems are sloppily incomplete. Inconsistency pervades. Grades vary between A's and F's and there are no obvious explanations for the variations. Harry's teacher has recommended he be given stimulant medication for hyperactivity, for surely something is terribly wrong.

At home Harry's room is in chaos. Last week's underwear is tucked between the mattress and the box spring, and bread crusts from last month, yesterday, and yesteryear are crunched up among his books, toys, and papers on the shelves. His behavior is equally chaotic. Sometimes he disappears down the street without a word and reappears hours later with apologies to Mom, who is frantic with fear. She blends scolding with loving as she puts her arm around him with affection but furiously threatens to "ground" him for a month. Life settles down for an hour or so and then he's gone again, only to return to the same ceremonial scolding and hugging. At meals he converts a normal chair into a one-legged rocker and never leaves a meal without at least four separate sets of reprimands. His activity pattern at home is continuous—continuous change, continuous mess, continuous noise, and continuous turmoil.

"Wifey, dear, it seems so quiet today. Where's Harry?"

"Yes, my darling, it is so nice and quiet. Harry's at Grandma's."
"Ah, yes!"

Bully Bob

Bob's temper tantrums have controlled the family since the terrible twos. Bob learned that he could get exactly what he wanted instantly if he lay on the floor and kicked his feet or held his breath until he was blue. Candy at the supermarket, sister Mary's toys, or going to town with Mom were all at his command if he protested loudly enough. So he did. Father told Mother she was spoiling their son. She insisted that Dad was just too hard on little Bobby and that he needed to be more understanding. So Dad tried.

By age seven, when Bob's shouting wasn't effective enough, he tried throwing things, just pillows and soft items at first, but then a jar or a dish. That showed his mom and dad that he was serious. Crashing vases are intimidating. The family learned to exercise care so that Bob would not become angry, thus he didn't have to resort to throwing often. Verbal threats kept his parents and siblings under his control. Homework? Studying? Why should Bob do his schoolwork? Who was going to make him do that boring math anyway? Certainly not his parents. Why should he care if he gets poor grades? He knows he can do that easy stuff without all the studying. Why do teachers give so many assignments? To no one's surprise, Bob's grades are poor.

Bob does have one complaint. He says the kids don't like him, they're always picking on him, and he has no friends. Teachers on the playground break up Bob's fights almost daily. He loses his temper if the guys don't play his way and throws the bat if he strikes out. "The ref should have called a ball," he shouts angrily. When the kids call him bully, he retorts, "They started it. They just don't like me!"

How to Determine If Your Child Has Underachievement Syndrome

The children I've described may be familiar. They may resemble some that you know. More likely, the child you suspect is an underachiever will be a blend of several of these descriptions. For example,

Rebellious Rebecca is often the adolescent stage of the child Manipulative Mary. The characteristics of Sick Sam and Taunted Terrance may be blended in one child. Many Passive Pauls and Perfectionist Pearls may be more or less extreme than those described here.

You may find that your child exhibits some of the habits or behaviors described, but you are uncertain as to whether these indicate a problem. It is true that achieving and happy children sometimes show many of the same characteristics as do underachievers. The main differences are in the degree to which they show the characteristics. All children—all people—achieve less than they are capable of some of the time. It is when underachievement becomes a habitual way of responding in school that it should become a serious concern.

For many children, and for their families and teachers, Underachievement Syndrome is a serious problem. In our society, it appears that Underachievement Syndrome has reached epidemic proportions.

Ask yourself the following questions before you read chapter 2. (If you're a teacher, read "this student" for "my child.")

1. Was my child the center of an unusual amount of attention for the first three years of his/her life?
2. Were my child's parents divorced before he/she was a teenager?
3. Did my child have many health problems as a preschooler?
4. Does my child have a same gender sibling who is less than three years younger or older than he/she?
5. Does my child want a lot of one-to-one attention?

Score 1 point for each yes response and total the points. Scores are explained below.

Total Points

4–5: My child encountered very serious risks for underachievement.

2–3: My child encountered fairly serious risks for underachievement.

1: My child encountered only minor risks for underachievement.

0: Indicates no obvious risk factors that would lead to underachievement.

READ THIS CHAPTER TO LEARN ABOUT RISK FACTORS THAT MAY INITIATE UNDERACHIEVEMENT SYNDROME.