

SYLVIA RIMM

On Raising Kids



A Newsletter to Help Parents and Teachers

Volume 19

Issue No. 1

Bright Kids, Poor Grades: And What You Can Do About It*



My third edition of *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades* celebrates more than 30 years of developing and using the Trifocal Model to reverse Underachievement Syndrome for capable children who are not working to their abilities in school. While this new edition continues to provide the same principles that have reversed underachievement for thousands of children, I've added sections that reflect information that has been gleaned from my clinical experiences, my research and that of others, and the successful experiences of other educators and parents.

“Reversing underachievement is about guiding children toward leading fulfilled lives.”

As a psychologist who has worked directly with families and educators, I find that whenever I give a presentation or workshop, at least one—and sometimes more than one—teacher or parent takes me aside to thank me for making a difference for their child or student. For me, this is an awesome experience and it motivates me to continue working with underachievers as well as to disseminate my work.

Reversing underachievement is more than just about achievement. It's really about guiding children toward leading fulfilled lives. My work is for parents who value achievement in their children and for the

teachers who are challenged to motivate all students. Although Underachievement Syndrome continues to be epidemic, with your help and knowledge we can motivate and inspire children to achieve, feel good about themselves, and make contributions to our society that needs their contributions. I hope you will use this information to both prevent and reverse Underachievement Syndrome in your classroom and/or in your home.

*Adapted from *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades: And What You Can Do About It* (Great Potential Press, 2008).

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What is Underachievement Syndrome?

What is underachievement and what causes it? There is no gene for underachievement. Instead, underachieving children seem not to have learned the process of achievement—in fact, they have learned to underachieve.

Underachievers are often disorganized, dawdle, 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 at all. They have innumerable excuses and 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. They blame their poor grades, which they say don't matter, on "terrible teachers." They think that drama, sports, music, or, in particular, having a good social life is more important than school work.

Underlying these children's poor study habits, weak skills, disorganization, and defensiveness is a feeling of a lack of personal control over their educational success. Underachievers aren't really certain that they can achieve their goals even if they work harder. They lack self-efficacy.



These children set their goals either too high or too low, and as a result, they guarantee failure. They want to be millionaires, professional football players, inventors of computer games, rock stars, Olympic gymnasts, or presidents, and they have magical ideas about the effort necessary to arrive at these unrealistic goals. They

have not yet discovered what the word work actually means. They can't build firm self-confidence because they haven't learned perseverance or a real sense of effort.

I wonder if Olivia will invite me to her party.

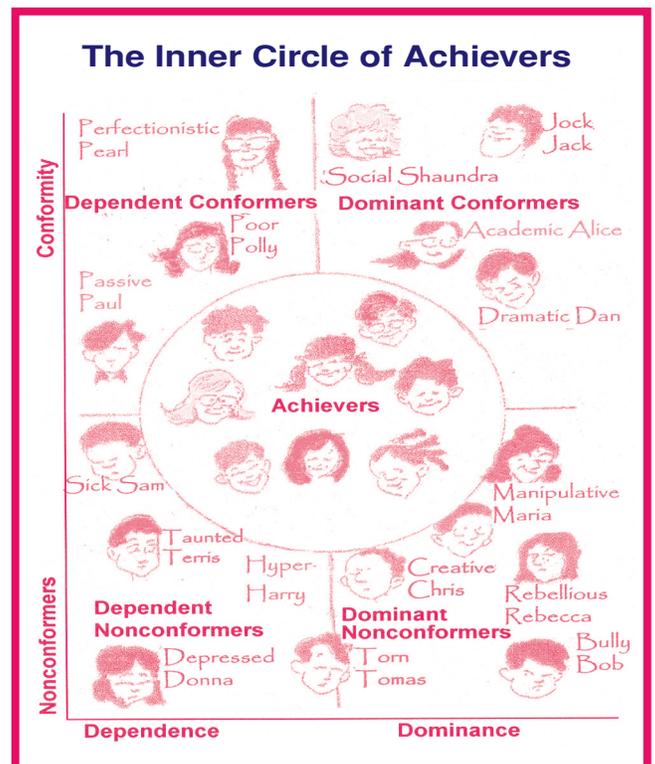


Underachievers often have highly competitive feelings, but they may not be obvious. They aspire to be winners and are poor losers. If they don't believe they can win, they may quit before they begin, or they may select only those experiences in which they are certain of victory. They are competitive,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

“Underachievers often have highly competitive feelings, but they may not be obvious.”

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. The Inner Circle figure from my book *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades* will help you to identify if you have an underachiever in your home or classroom. These children have not learned to work hard or persevere. They have not learned to cope with competition and avoid full school effort by making excuses.

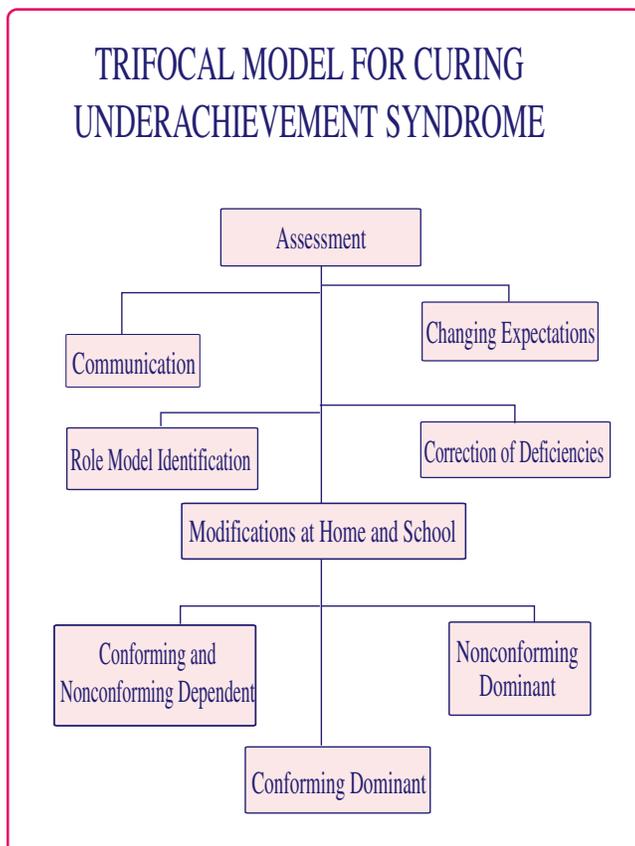


How You Can Reverse Underachievement Syndrome Using the Trifocal Model

At Family Achievement Clinic, we are able to reverse underachievement in roughly four out of five children by using a three-pronged approach. We call it the Trifocal Model because it focuses on the child, the parents, and the school.

Many schools have also used the Trifocal Model with excellent success. It has been utilized effectively in regular school programs, programs at underperforming schools, special education and gifted programs, and for children in kindergarten through Grade 12. It has also been used with college students.

The Trifocal Model includes six steps, of which the first five apply to all underachievers. In step six, which is divided into three types of underachieving children, you will select the ideas that most apply to your underachieving child or student. See the figure below illustrating the Trifocal Model. The full model and strategies are described in *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades*.



Adapting the Trifocal Model for Disadvantaged Students

While ideally the Trifocal Model should include parent involvement, sometimes parents either refuse to get involved or are experiencing difficult life events that prevent their becoming involved. Students whose parents cannot participate in the model for reversing underachievement are defined as *disadvantaged* for the purpose of reversing their underachievement.



Students will need an adaptation of the Trifocal Model that a school in Colorado facetiously termed “the bifocal version” of the Trifocal Model. Most steps of the model are similar to the original Trifocal Model, but a “child advocate” substitutes for the parent reinforcement role and meets with the student weekly to monitor progress. Also, instead of the typical homework routine that parents conduct, an after-school study club can be instituted where students complete all



their homework under teacher supervision. These two modifications make the model very effective for disadvantaged students, despite the lack of active parent involvement.

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Strategies for Reversing Underachievement

Listed below are strategies from my new book, *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades*. Parents and teachers can select and implement those that most apply:

- Easing Perfection
- Independent Homework
- Teaching Concentration
- Goal-Directed Tutoring
- Multiple Methods for Giving Instructions
- Teaching a Growth Mindset
- Building Resilience through Biography
- Teaching Organizational Strategies
- Teaching Other Children
- Reversing Early Childhood Dominance
- Avoiding Confrontations
- Differentiating Curriculum
- Building Task Value
- Teaching Healthy Competition
- Teaching to the Emotional Needs of Students
- Organizational Skills
- Encouraging Activities with Intrinsic Interest
- Coping With Emotional Ups and Downs
- Anti-Arguing Instructions
- Giving Them Power and an Audience
- Avoiding Student Manipulations
- Changing Academic Grouping
- Helping Students Find Balance
- Appealing to Altruism



The ALLIANCE Acrostic briefly summarizes the strategies that can be used for reversing underachievement. Your ability to inspire and engage students, as well as your patience, is most helpful!

ALLIANCE FOR REVERSING STUDENT UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Ally with the student privately about interests and concerns.

Listen to what the student says.

Learn about what the student is thinking.

Initiate opportunities for recognition of the student's strengths.

Add experimental ideas for engaging curricular and extracurricular activities.

Nurture relationships with appropriate adult and peer role models.

Consequence reasonably but firmly if student doesn't meet commitments.

Emphasize effort, independence, realistic expectations, how strengths can be used to cope with problems and extend possibilities patiently.

NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTIONS

Sylvia Rimm On Raising Kids is published quarterly. The introductory price for individuals is \$16/year; \$20/year thereafter. School districts can purchase a copyright edition for an introductory \$160/year; \$200/year thereafter, to copy for all parents, educators, and administrators.

For more information, or to order:

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PARENT POINTER* **Rimm's Laws of Achievement**

RIMM'S LAW #1. Children are more likely to be achievers if their parents join together to give the same clear and positive message about school effort and expectations.

RIMM'S LAW #2. Children can learn appropriate behaviors more easily if they have effective models to imitate.

RIMM'S LAW #3. Communication about a child between adults (referential speaking) dramatically affects children's behaviors and self-perceptions.

RIMM'S LAW #4. Overreactions by parents to children's successes and failures lead them to feel either intense pressure to succeed or to despair and discouragement in dealing with failure.

RIMM'S LAW #5. Children feel more tension when they are worrying about their work than when they are doing that work.



RIMM'S LAW #6. Children develop self-confidence through struggle.

RIMM'S LAW #7. Deprivation and excess frequently exhibit the same symptoms.

RIMM'S LAW #8. Children develop confidence and an internal sense of control if power is given to them in gradually increasing increments as they show maturity and responsibility.

RIMM'S LAW #9. Children become oppositional if one adult allies with them against a parent or a teacher, making them more powerful than an adult.

RIMM'S LAW #10. Adults should avoid confrontations with children unless they are reasonably sure they can control the outcomes.

RIMM'S LAW #11. Children will become achievers only if they learn to function in competition.



RIMM'S LAW #12. Children will continue to achieve if they usually see the relationship between the learning process and its outcomes.

(Source: *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades: And What You Can Do About It* by S.B. Rimm, Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press, 2008)

*Adapted from: *Learning Leads Q-Cards—Parent Pointers* ©1996 by Sylvia Rimm.

Have Dr. Rimm Speak At Your Event

Her energizing and inspiring messages make her an ideal and dynamic keynote speaker who will fascinate your audience. A variety of educational and parenting topics are available.

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DrRimm@sylviarimm.com**



STUDENT STEPPING STONES* **Suggestions for Remembering Assignments**

1. Don't use small assignment notebooks. They almost always get lost.
2. Assignment notebooks can be full-size spiral notebooks. Each day's assignments should be on a fresh page. Tear out the page when all assignments are complete. The advantages are:
 - 1) the notebook is less likely to be lost because of size,
 - 2) you derive satisfaction from tearing out completed pages and showing them to your parents or teachers,
 - 3) the new assignments are always on the top page. One disadvantage is that it's somewhat wasteful of paper.

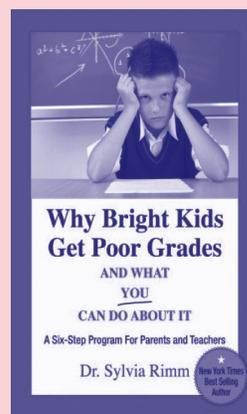
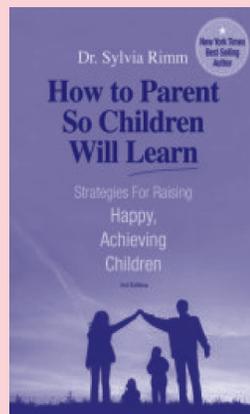


3. Teachers sometimes prepare special assignment forms for children to be placed in their loose-leaf notebook. Time at the end of the day can be used to copy assignments in the appropriate place and gather necessary books.
4. Some students find it helpful to use double-sided folders for each subject. Unfinished work goes on one side. Completed work is saved on the other side. On the weekend, review your folder, save what you need and toss the rest.
5. Create your own assignment reminder strategies. Some students are very inventive, and once you invest in your own devices you will remember. Even silly ideas can work.



*Adapted from: *Learning Leads Q-Cards—Student Stepping Stones*
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Sylvia Says... *Dear Dr. Sylvia:*

I have a fifth-grade daughter who up until recently has been an A-B student. Lately, she has been bringing home papers and tests with scores of D's and F's on them. She forgets to bring material home from school to study and is making careless mistakes. I've asked her if she has a problem with school, and her answer is always "no." She seems to like school and her teachers and friends. One of her problems is that she doesn't know how to prioritize her work to organize herself. Do you have any suggestions as to what I might do to help her? I've asked her teacher for some help and guidance, but her teacher says they want the children to learn to be responsible for their work. Any help would greatly be appreciated.



all her required books. Then, as she completes each assignment, she can place the assignment in her backpack to keep herself organized. If you go over the routine with her a few times, she'll feel reassured and supported.

To help her with her careless mistakes, suggest she check things over twice and let you look over her work when she's done. If you see a few mistakes, you can point them out to her. If she's done careful work, tell her you're proud of her improvement, and play a board game with her after her homework's done.



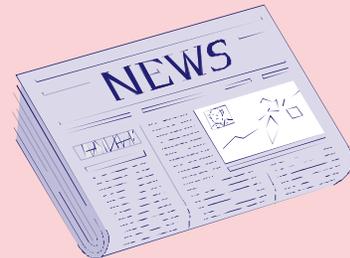
If these simple approaches don't take care of the problem, I suggest you read more about underachievement in my book *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades* to determine if your daughter fits into the underachievement patterns I've described. If you need help beyond the book, consult with a psychologist to determine if there are other underlying difficulties.

Fifth grade seems to be a classic grade for some children to begin an underachieving pattern similar to the one you've described for your daughter. Several changes happen concurrently at this time. The first change is that the curriculum usually becomes considerably more difficult, including more homework and harder grading than earlier years. The second issue is that in many schools there's peer pressure to underachieve, and A's may no longer be considered cool by children her age.

You can begin by asking your daughter how her friends feel about good grades. If she admits that she feels peer pressure, this is a good time to have a talk with her about always doing her best and about how important good performance is for the rest of her life. If that isn't the issue, you can say, "Fifth grade is a more difficult grade, so don't be disappointed in yourself. You have to work harder this year. Most kids work harder to keep good grades." Show your daughter how to use her assignment notebook, and ask her to routinely check it before she leaves school to be sure she has



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Sylvia Rimm On Raising Kids Newspaper
Column online at
www.creators.com/lifestylefeatures.html
(next, click Dr. Rimm's picture)

Dear Dr. Sylvia:

My 13-year-old daughter has had a problem in school. Her grades in math, English, and literature are slipping badly. The only homework she brings home is her math. She's been seeing her math teacher after school for help, but when she takes the tests, she fails.

When she studies for tests in literature, vocabulary, or social studies, she passes with flying colors. I've told her this, but she won't study. She's in eighth grade, and I don't want to have to go through this battle with her regarding her poor study habits. Do you have any suggestions as to how I can get her to bring home all her materials and books to study? I've tried taking things away from her and grounding her. Her grades pick up the following week, but the old habits repeat themselves again.



I suggest you ask for an evaluation by the school psychologist or arrange to see a private psychologist. An evaluation can help you determine if your daughter has a math disability and what her strengths and learning styles are. Begin a regular study plan including weekly communication from her teachers.

The study plan could involve both rewards and consequences for appropriate study habits. Stay with the plan long enough so your daughter can build confidence and see regular good grades on her report card.

Also, consider that peer relations, sibling rivalry, differences in parenting with one parent being easier than the other, and teachers can all make differences in your daughter's attitude toward school. You can read more about those in my book *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades*.

“Underachievers often have uneven abilities.”

There seem to be two very different issues with your daughter, but they may be related. Math seems genuinely difficult and frustrating and despite efforts,

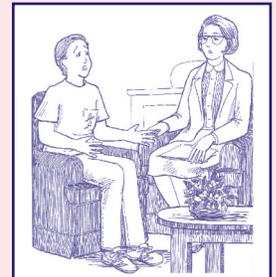


she's done poorly on tests. Other subjects seem reasonably easy for her if she puts forth just a little effort; although she's unwilling to do that. It's possible that her loss of confidence in math could generalize

to her attitude about all schoolwork. Underachievers often have uneven abilities.

Family Achievement Clinic Sylvia B. Rimm, Ph.D., Director

Family Achievement Clinic specializes in working with capable children who are not performing to their abilities in school. Gifted children are the clinic's specialty. The clinic also offers a comprehensive range of psychological services centered on children, adolescents and their families. Services include therapy for underachievement syndrome, attention deficit disorders, anxieties, and oppositional problems, as well as parenting and marriage therapy, divorce counseling, and career planning.



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