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Underachievement: It's Not About the Grades

"I forgot my homework." "It's the teacher's fault." "I promise I'll do better next time." Do your children and students utter these familiar words when you review another poor report card with them? You really thought Jimmy would do better this year. When you question him further about his school work, he generates more excuses, he seems waylaid, immobilized. You focus on his grades, study habits, and "laziness," but deep inside you know there is more to it. Why does he always choose the line of least resistance in academics, in life? Why isn't he motivated? There really is more to it. It's not about the grades. Fluctuating grades are symptoms of real underlying problems, and struggles. Jimmy is an underachiever (UA). Underachievement results in wasted talent and robs our society of untold benefits.

The UA performs way below his potential. He is typically immature in his overall personality development and lags behind his peers in behaving responsibly. UAs refrain from successfully engaging in tasks, responsibilities, and commitments which would inevitably propel them to higher levels of maturity. They consciously and subconsciously avoid growing up. These kids are bright. They may not appear depressed but their behavior signals internal problems. UAs are not like most children typically seen in counseling. Outwardly, their problems don't seem severe, but left untreated, UAs continue their self-defeating patterns. They fade into the background instead of achieving the recognition they are capable of achieving. These are good kids at risk for school failure, dropping out, or accomplishing far below their potential in life.

Behavior Patterns

1. They usually score average or above on standard achievement and intelligence tests.
2. They require constant reminders and supervision in completing important obligations such as chores, homework, and projects.
3. Grounding, reasoning, and rewards, fail to motivate them.
4. They frequently divert attention away from themselves when held accountable for their actions, i.e., shifting blame onto teachers, school officials, and parents for their poor academic performance.
5. They often respond with brief and vague explanations such as "I don't know, or I forgot," when questioned why they did not follow through with assignments.
6. People comment on their charm and friendliness. They are basically good children.
7. They seem immature for their chronological age, particularly with regards to responsibility and independence.
8. They either lack concern or worry excessively about their future.
9. They have few or no effective study habits: no routine schedule or methods for doing homework and studying for exams.
10. They procrastinate constantly and may even brag about how well they "do under pressure." They are chronically late in completing their schoolwork and chores.
11. They avoid facing challenges which can lead to success. i.e., either do not join, or drop out of competitive activities.
12. They promise they will do better next time. Although starting out fine, they return to old underachievement patterns. They lack commitment.
13. They complain that school is boring.
14. They seem more oriented toward fun than work, demonstrating little initiative to work for accomplishments.
15. They frequently make you feel angry, frustrated, and extremely concerned about their choices. You are deeply concerned about their future.
16. They constantly elicit your rescuing.
17. They exert more energy getting out of work than completing it.
18. They exhibit difficulty obtaining or maintaining higher level responsibilities, thus losing privileges frequently.
19. They distort the truth about missing assignments.
20. They manipulate others into doing their work, or leaving them alone.
21. They rely excessively on friends and family to help meet routine obligations. They overtly depend on others to motivate them.
22. They exert minimal effort required in sports, academics, etc. They seem to hold back from achieving their potential in several other areas as well.
23. Teachers report their attention-seeking behavior in class. They assume the role of class clown, their disruptive behavior distracts others.
24. Their grades fluctuate from one marking period to another. Subjects are raised one period only to plummet the next. Low grades frequently result from missing assignments or incomplete schoolwork.
25. They have been achieving below their potential for at least two years.

Dynamics

UAs have mixed feelings about managing their lives. Their behavior reflects their difficulty moving forward in life. Some UAs have problems trusting people, while others are friendly or overly anxious. The majority of UAs are outgoing but very passive and nonchalant about the things that really matter. Personality testing reveals many definite conflicts. Fears of separation prevail. The UA dreads growing up and leaving home. They are highly dependent on others. The UA represses his feelings of anxiety, fear, and confusion over individuating. They want to be taken care of, rescued, and told what to do. UAs with strong needs for approval, fear failure and rejection. This group tends to be perfectionistic. They invest time and energy protecting themselves against failure. They deal with conflicts through avoidance, worrying, and going out of their way to please others. They experience substantial inner turmoil when they consider forming or asserting their own opinions. They fear rejection and feel compelled to produce exceptional work to maintain their "worthiness." Motivated by dire needs for approval, reassurance, direction, and fears of rejection, they press on until they shut down completely. Ultimately they bring on what they fear most, failure. Other UAs fear success. They know that the more they succeed, more will be expected of them - they risk promotion. They fear having to handle additional responsibility which comes with success. Their air of congeniality and social poise covers up intense fears of separation. They are intimidated rather than challenged by opportunities for success. They avoid situations and tasks that lead to freedom. Family, school officials, and peers are charmed into taking care of them. Frequently they convince themselves that they are lazy and that their underachievement behavior is unintentional.

UAs project their feelings of anger and insecurity onto authority figures. They resent being pushed yet constantly arrange for others to direct their lives. Feelings of inadequacy, and low self-worth prevail. UAs often feel ambivalent about their mothers, whom they perceive as nurturing and supportive yet over involved and domineer-

ing. They recognize their need to separate from mom but depend on her too much. When they attempt to move away from her, fears of isolation and abandonment emerge. UAs are usually enmeshed with their mothers. On the other hand, the UA perceives his father as aloof, distant, peripheral, and preoccupied. The common scenario involves a hard-driving, over-achieving father and a passive immature, underachieving son. The father-son relationship in UAs frequently includes a distant psychologically absent father, who appears indifferent, yet outwardly pleasant most of the time, but worries considerably about his son's academic performance. The male UA longs for a close relationship with his father.

Causes

The causes of underachievement are complex, resulting from the interaction of several variables such as immature personality development; poor or enmeshed relationships with their parents and significant others; family pressures and marital tension; ineffectual role models, intense pressures to achieve; numerous lifestyle and societal changes; demands and stressors; and child rearing patterns. Single parent and blended family issues contribute to underachievement. Dysfunctional families are usually divided which enables troubled children to split parents, blocking a united front. Most of these children come from families who strongly advocate achievement. Under pressure, these youngsters begin slowing down and initiating less, fearing mistakes until finally they become confused, panic stricken and immobilized. Parents of these children are frequently hypercritical themselves and over-protective in governing their children's moves. These students begin associating achievement with pain and suffering rather excitement and joy. This UA arranges to have his parent's rescue him, eliciting their over-involvement, unlike the UA who fears success and tries to get his parents to do his work and leave him alone. The UA who fears success also comes from families where achievement and success are highly stressed. The more he feels pressure to assume additional responsibility, the more he passively resists. He maintains a safe posture of remaining dependent to avoid the fears, stresses, and obligations of becoming independent. All UAs are blocked at lower levels of emotional development.

Interventions

Intervention is the first step toward healing and growth. Your primary objective is to help eliminate self-defeating patterns and move your children toward fulfilling their God-given potential. These techniques take time to precipitate change. More severe underlying emotional problems require professional counseling. Carry out these interventions in a loving manner.

1. Identify underachievement patterns early.
2. Evaluate the situations where you enable your child to underachieve. What things do you do for him that he could do for himself?
3. Refrain from doing or having others do his work.
4. Hold him accountable for his behavior. See that he completes his assignments or chores before going out to play, until he becomes more reliable.

Approach the UAs fearing failure in a very calm, gentle, compassionate, understanding manner. These youngsters should not be confronted heavily because this approach usually intensifies their anxiety and exacerbates the situation. Gear interventions helping them acknowledge their feelings and conflicts and understanding how they relate to their problems. Once

they make the connection between the two, they position themselves to move forward with their lives. They should be held accountable too. The following suggestions work best with UAs struggling with fears of failure.

1. Refrain from asking detailed questions about his excuses.
2. Sit by him and offer support and encouragement and gradually reduce this time to provide periodic checks.
3. Give clear, direct, brief instructions on his responsibilities.
4. Focus on his underlying feelings rather than his behavior and excuses.
5. Avoid allowing him to frustrate you. Take breaks.
6. When reviewing his underachievement behaviors use words or phrases which focus on his underlying feelings.
7. Use your feelings as a guide to understanding his. For instance, when you find yourself feeling anxious about his homework or upcoming exam, that is probably how he feels inside. In this situation say, "You are feeling pretty uptight about this test."
8. Remind yourself as you work with your child that much of his underachievement behavior results from his internal struggles and conflicts over growing up.

Approach the UA who fears success with the same intention of raising his awareness of his behavior and underachievement struggles, but do so in the ways listed below.

1. Reframe his behavior as resulting from his choices.
2. Do not argue with him about his excuses.
3. Give clear, direct, brief instructions on his responsibilities.
4. Stick to his behavior and underlying feelings rather than his excuses.
5. Avoid allowing him to frustrate you with his passive resistant behavior.
6. When reviewing his underachievement behaviors use words or phrases which focus on his choices and decisions.

For example, say "I see that you choose not to do your work," or "It's interesting that you decided to be late today."

7. Use your feelings as a guide to understanding his. For example, when you find yourself feeling angry at him over homework and chores, that is probably how he feels inside. In this situation say, "You seem angry about something." and then set limits.

Underachievement is not about the grades. It's always about something else. It's really about the underlying hurts, arrested emotional development, unresolved individual and family issues, family crises, and sometimes serious personality conflicts. Effective treatment addresses the root causes and leads to freedom from the blockage in people's lives. The process requires time and effort but the difference is worth it.

Prevention

- Keep your focus, go forward with your own vision of who you see yourself and what you aim to accomplish in life. See your children for all that they can be and let them know you see so much in them. Believe in your child and show it in your loving, nurturing, supportive relationship with him or her.
- Build strong parent-child relationships from the beginning. Connect with your kids on all levels, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.
- Look at yourself. Admit your mistakes. Commit to change. Get help.

- Promote optimal growth and development in your children from the beginning.
- Teach good problem-solving and organizational skills.
- Start with conscientious parenting and awareness of your child's unique behavior patterns for coping. Intervene early. Consider professional help if you find yourself worn out and have tried everything.
- Allow your children to struggle through some problems so they can develop stamina.
- Avoid repeatedly rescuing them from difficult situations.
- Be honest with your children and share times in your life when you had the same apprehensions.
- Encourage independence and responsibility gradually from an early age without pressure or abruptly letting go. Show your children that you do not reject them or think less of them when they are afraid or make mistakes. Communicate unconditional love and acceptance of them. Examine your own needs for perfection. A positive, nurturing, loving, affirming, consistent, firm approach helps youngsters develop internal motivation for achievement. Reinforce and congratulate all efforts to assume more responsibility. Help your youngster build upon his successes. Use some of the exact phrases presented earlier to congratulate him on his positive efforts, no matter how small, when he behaves responsibly.

For example, when he completes an assignment or chore say, "You decided to do your work, good for you," or "You chose to do that on your own, Great!" or "You really stayed with that work even though you felt like giving up, I'll bet that makes you feel good about yourself." "Great, I knew you could do it. That's exactly how I see you." It wasn't easy but you kept at it until you finished, you did it!" "I see so much in you." "You are an awesome, wonderful person, I love you." Statements like these over time will help your youngster develop and thrive.

F.Y.I.

I have considerable experience working with children, adolescents, and adult underachievers. I enjoy helping them move forward with their lives.

We at Christian Counselors of Houston delight in serving you. We are committed to seeing our clients live victoriously.

I hope you are informed, encouraged, and moved to make positive changes and impact those around you in meaningful ways by my newsletters. I always welcome our feedback. Call me anytime.

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