

helping hand

You know your child can do better in school so what do you do when they underachieve?

It doesn't make sense; you know you have a bright, inquisitive and intelligent child. They may devour Harry Potter books within a week and can do puzzles designed for children twice their age, yet every piece of homework they submit comes home covered in red pen. What can you do about it?

When children have a significant gap between their 'actual ability' and what they produce it's labelled 'underachievement'. The signs usually begin in the early years but once it starts it's a slippery slope with the effects being cumulative as they grow older.

There are several possible reasons for children underachieving:

[1] Learning Disorders:

The easiest type of underachiever to assist is the underachiever with a learning disorder (such as dyslexia, dysgraphia or ADHD etc).

[2] Gifted and Highly Capable:

Very capable (sometimes gifted) children underachieve for a variety of reasons. Most common is boredom in the classroom where lack of challenge and repetitive work makes them zone out and lose interest in learning at school. It is also "not cool" to be smart in many school cultures.

[3] Emotional:

Children with an emotional handbrake on their ability to learn are perhaps the most difficult to turn around.

- A child with a low self-esteem is very vulnerable to the judgement of others and thinks that conforming and being 'liked' by their peer group is much more secure and important than taking the risk of achieving and standing out.
- A child with high anxiety may have a fear of failure so they do anything to stay in their comfort zone and avoid challenges.
- A child who has difficulty with interpersonal relationships and emotional control may also underachieve as conflict reduces their concentration while they focus upon working through a relationship that is bothering them.
- The child who lacks insight about themselves and the world around them may have limited or no personal goals and poor organisational and time management skills, which again leads to not fulfilling their potential. Some children from more affluent homes may not see the 'need' to strive, so they do not develop the determination and problem solving skills that are imperative in achievers.

Other factors that can cause or contribute to underachievement include the family and home

environment, school culture, sibling achievement and parental expectations.

What to do

[1] If you think that your child can do better, the first step is to seek a psychometric assessment to verify your suspicions.

[2] Once you have the data and recommendations in a report, make an appointment with the relevant school personnel and develop a plan to bring your child to their potential in a supportive and positive learning environment.

[3] Ensure that pastoral, mentoring or counselling support is available to assist your child emotionally as they often have difficulties with motivation, socialisation and poor self-image.

[4] Make sure that relationships within the home are supportive with each other and the school community.

[5] Acknowledge your child for their enthusiasm and knowledge rather than school grades.

We all want the best for our children and for them to achieve their potential but sometimes they just need a bit of a helping hand.

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