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Keeping Potential Drop Outs in Class

By CWK Network Producer

For the first time in American history, today's teenagers are less likely to graduate from high school than their parents, according to the children's advocacy group Education Trust. What can parents do when their child is underachieving in the classroom and on the verge of dropping out?

"If there's nobody to lean back on, I'm just going to fall like I did before."

-Davis Ma, Age 15

Davis Ma could certainly be considered an underachiever. By sixth grade his grades had bottomed out, and he often skipped school, "I really didn't care about school," Davis says. "I thought school was crap, and wouldn't help me at all....It was horrible, I was really bad, getting in trouble with the teachers, cursing at teachers, yelling at them."

Studies show as many as 25 to 50 percent of students in middle and high school underachieve and one in four students will drop out.

And when a child is struggling, a parent's first reaction might be to crack down on a child like Davis, but Psychologist Nadine Kaslow says that approach often backfires.

"I rarely have seen that taking a hard approach with an underachiever helps. I mean, to scare a kid into doing homework is not a good approach, and so I think you really need to find out what is your child trying to communicate to you and really hear them."

Kaslow adds, "I would find out a lot from the child about what's going on with them, what do they think is going on with this, how do they feel about it? What's going on socially for them?"

In Davis' case, that sympathetic ear came from a tutor, Gloria Rachel.

"Mrs. Rachel showed she cared, and she showed me that school was important, so she was a good influence."

Gloria Rachel says that when it comes to underachievers, patience and compassion are equally important virtues. "Just being there for them, letting them know you care, not pushing your values on them. But somehow getting them to know what your values are, and hoping everything works out."

And Rachel says often optimism pays off with underachieving children, "They will eventually grow out of it, she says. "If you can just hang on, and if you've done what you've meant to do, show them support and love and caring, and they know that they have someone that they can lean on, eventually, they'll come around."

Davis, who's now in eighth grade, says in his most recent semester he got almost all A's. He says it was Mrs. Rachel who gave him the inspiration. "And I felt special and stuff like that, I didn't want to let her down, you know, after she did so much for me."

The respect and support Davis received from his tutor certainly raised his self-esteem. Experts say it is often a low self esteem that leads to underachievement in the first place, "so often kids underachieve because they don't feel good about themselves," Dr. Kaslow says. "Underachievement is a way of communicating."

Davis agrees that having a sympathetic ear has meant everything to his success. "If there's nobody to lean back on, I'm just gonna fall like I did before."

Underachieving Kids

By CWK Network, Inc.

Most parents expect that their children will succeed as students just as they expect to succeed as parents. When a child does not perform to their potential, a parent is often confused, disappointed, angry and afraid. Whether the lack of success is academic skills, social behavior or both, the recognition that a youngster is not doing well can cause pain. The problem of underachievement can be difficult to define and often has different meanings to professionals in different occupations. This is one of the many reasons underachieving children often do not receive the help they need. Underachievement is commonly used as an umbrella term to describe anyone who is not performing in a particular activity as well as someone who knows that activity well and thinks they should. Usually the term refers to lack of academic success; however adults who choose jobs that do not reflect the degrees they hold or athletes who fail to perform to their potential could also be referred to as underachievers.

What Parents Need to Know

There is perhaps no situation more frustrating for parents or teachers than living or working with children who do not perform as well academically as their potential indicates they can. These children are labeled as underachievers, yet few people agree on exactly what this term means. At what point does underachievement end and achievement begin? Is a gifted student who is failing mathematics while doing superior work in reading an underachiever? Certainly, the phenomenon of underachievement is as complex and multifaceted as the children to whom this label has been applied.

Experts offer this advice for parents looking to reverse the patterns of underachieving behaviors in students.

- **Supportive Strategies.** Classroom techniques and designs that allow students to feel they are part of a “family” rather than a “factory.” An adult should try to include methods such as holding class meetings to discuss student concerns; designing curriculum activities based on the needs and interests of the children; and allowing students to bypass assignments on subjects in which they have previously shown competency.
- **Intrinsic Strategies.** These strategies incorporate the idea that student’s self-concepts as learners are tied closely to their desire to achieve academically. Thus, a classroom that invites positive attitudes is likely to encourage achievement. In classrooms of this type, teachers encourage attempts, not just successes; they value student input in creating classroom rules and responsibilities; and they allow students to evaluate their own work before receiving a grade from the teacher.
- **Remedial Strategies.** Teachers who are effective in reversing underachieving behaviors recognize that students are not perfect – that each child has specific strengths and weaknesses as well as social, emotional and intellectual needs. With remedial strategies, students are given chances to excel in their areas of strength and interest while opportunities are provided in specific areas of learning deficiencies. This remediation is done in a “safe environment in which mistakes are considered a part of learning for everyone, including the teacher.”

Resources

- [Education Trust](#)
- [Education Resources Information Center](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education](#)

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