

The Emotional Edge Parenting Strategies to Motivate Underachieving Gifted Students

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—Del Siegle, PhD

The underachievement of capable children is an area of concern for many parents and educators. Although the study of student underachievement has a long educational history, it is more productive to consider what motivates students to do well. Students tend to be motivated when they find a task meaningful, believe that they have the skills to do it, and find their efforts supported by those around them.

Unfortunately, many gifted students do not view their school experience as meaningful. For instance, they may not find school intellectually stimulating, because they have already mastered the content or can master it quickly. Repetition bores many of these students, and once they have learned to expect boredom in class, they will fail to embrace new learning experiences when they arise. Other gifted students find school topics uninteresting regardless of the level of challenge, because they have developed a well-defined area of interest that is not matched by what happens in school. This leaves them “turned off” to what is taught. Still others do not appear to be interested in anything, either because their early school experiences failed to nourish their natural curiosity or because they doubt their ability to do well. Generally, a student views tasks as meaningful if they gratify a personal interest, are tied to the child’s identity, have an immediate use, or will clearly be useful in the future. Parents can help their children find school meaningful in the following ways:

- By modeling their own curiosity about the world around them. However, parents must demonstrate how curiosity is transformed into action. For example, a question about the number of moons orbiting Saturn might lead to looking up the answer on the Internet or in an encyclopedia.
- By nurturing their children’s curiosity and love of learning through opportunities outside school that help them explore their interests.
- By letting their children know that they value school and showing them how their school experiences are important now and will prove useful in the future.
- By monitoring their children’s homework, which again sends the message that parents value what their children do in school.
- By sharing their children’s interests with the school and working with the school and their children to tie these interests to school projects.

In addition to valuing school, motivated students believe that they have the skills to do well in school. It is imperative also that children recognize their own role in developing these skills. Students who believe that their abilities are not innate but have been developed are more likely to attempt challenging tasks. Gifted students are at risk for

believing that their abilities are simply given, particularly if others in their lives have not discussed their giftedness with them. Parents can try a number of approaches:

- Talk about their children's giftedness with them by helping them recognize that they are continually changing and growing and that they have a hand in their own accomplishments and growth.
- Document their children's growth by saving their schoolwork or videotaping them performing various tasks and sharing these items with them later. The children will be impressed with how much progress they have made.
- Help them understand that challenging situations are opportunities to acquire or improve skills and that encountering difficulty does not mean that they are not intelligent.
- Help children recognize the part that effort has played in their growth by complimenting them with specific examples. A general compliment such as "Good work" is not as effective as "Your studying paid off—now you really know the periodic table."

Parents should also talk about their daily lives and emphasize how their own efforts lead to benefits. Parents who only complain that their supervisors do not appreciate them may send their children the message that putting forth effort is a waste of time.

It's important for parents to share their positive work experiences as well as how they persist in spite of the inevitable negative aspects of the work world. Individuals who struggle but succeed build confidence in themselves; they also offer others a better lesson in how success is usually won than those who simply glide to it.

Finally, students must expect to succeed and know that those around them will support their work. They must learn to trust that their efforts, even if momentarily thwarted, will pay off in the end. To help their children gain this trust, parents can do the following:

- Create opportunities for their children to interact with role models. Students' expectations are based on the experiences of their parents and role models.
- Discuss cause-and-effect relationships with their children. In particular, parents can counsel children faced with difficult situations on how to change the environment to fit their needs, how to achieve success by adjusting to the existing environment, or when to let go of a fruitless idea or hopeless situation.

Comments such as "My teacher doesn't like me," "I can't learn this way," and "This stuff is too easy" are indicative of students who see their environment as unsupportive. Sometimes the limiting situation is beyond the control of the student, and parents may need to intervene and work with the school. The teacher might be persuaded to adjust the level of the curriculum, modify the learning environment, or change the way he or she interacts with the student. At other times students may need to adjust their behavior to be successful. Underachieving students, their parents, and their teachers must work together if the school environment is not optimal.

There is no silver bullet to motivate gifted children; however, parents can use the strategies mentioned here to begin to create an environment in which their children feel confident about themselves and value achievement. By helping them realize that they have a role in their own talent development, parents can promote their children's motivation and self-determination.

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