

1. Meet with your child's teacher(s) and discuss the problem. Keep the mindset that you and the teacher are allies to help your child succeed.
2. Ask the teacher to communicate regularly with you about the problem and its progress.
3. Educate yourself by reading books, exploring the Internet, and talking with other parents and education professionals.
4. Encourage your child to identify and pursue his or her interests.
5. Talk to your child about his or her life. Ask questions, avoid being judgmental, and listen carefully.
6. When one thing doesn't work, try another. There is almost always a solution. It requires persistence and the belief that your child can be helped.
7. If your child is an adolescent, it's easy to get caught up in the power struggle and forget that the teen years comprise one of the most stressful times in a person's life. While your teen may come across as being angry or lazy, he or she may actually be depressed and confused by all of the changes in his or her life.

#### SEE THESE HANDOUTS ON RELATED TOPICS

Anxiety in Children  
 Attention-Seeking with Disruptive Behavior  
 Depression in Children and Teens  
 Helping Kids Manage Angry Feelings  
 Helping Your Child Succeed in School  
 How to Build Your Child's Self-Esteem  
 How to Cope When Parenting Seems Overwhelming  
 Positive Reinforcement (for Parents)  
 When Kids Don't Want to Go to School

# When Kids Underachieve

## WHAT IS ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT?

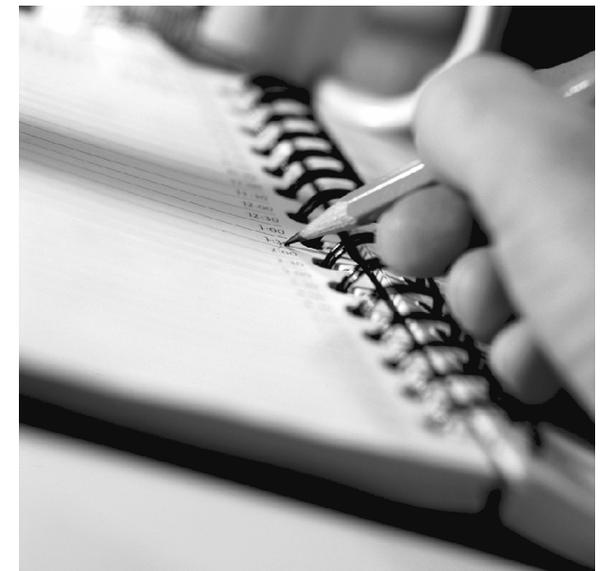
One of the more frustrating experiences of being a parent is when one's son or daughter does not achieve up to his or her ability in school. Regardless of the child's ability, doing less than he or she is capable of is confusing and frustrating. If the underachievement is severe and lasts for more than a school year, or if it causes the student distress, it should be considered a problem. There are many possible causes for underachievement and just as many different solutions. If the problem is considered objectively and the student is provided with adequate support, the chances are very good that the problem can be resolved. It is important to address issues of underachievement because they can quickly lead to a child losing self-esteem and coming to believe that he or she is not capable of doing well academically.

## WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry ([www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org))

Holt, John. *How Children Fail*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Press, 1995.

McEwan, Elaine. *When Kids Say No to School: Helping Children at Risk of Failure, Refusal, or Dropping Out*. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishing, 1998.





## WHAT ARE COMMON SIGNS OF ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT?

A combination of the following signs usually points to a problem:

- Grades have gradually gotten worse
- Does well on intelligence tests but does poorly in school
- Receives grades that are one full grade level below his or her ability level
- Is disorganized
- Shows little or no interest in school
- Makes excuses about his or her performance
- Doesn't finish assignments
- Loses papers and assignments
- Socializes too much or too little
- Avoids doing schoolwork by escaping into reading or playing games on the computer
- Doesn't put forth enough effort
- Gives up easily
- Has low self-esteem
- Seems depressed
- Has an inflated view of his or her abilities
- Underestimates the amount of work required to complete assignments properly
- Doesn't relate well with others of his or her own age group
- Is uncooperative
- Does not plan ahead
- Avoids working on things considered boring or too difficult
- Seeks individual attention from teachers; seems lost in a classroom full of other kids.



## WHAT CAUSES ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT?

Academic underachievement may be caused by disorders such as learning disabilities, neurological

problems, or other conditions such as attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). If a child is tested and found to have any of these conditions, they should be addressed first and the problem may clear up.

Most students who achieve below their ability level could be considered normal students who come from families where academic achievement is valued. This makes the problem all the more frustrating. The causes may be a combination of factors, and it is important to carefully assess the situation and not rush into an explanation of the causes. The following kinds of factors may be contributing to the student's situation in some combination:

### School Factors:

- The work is not challenging enough.
- The school is too competitive.
- The school is not competitive enough.
- The student dislikes the teacher.
- The student has just moved from another school.
- The child is feeling pressure from other students to slack off or socialize.
- The student is expected to conform to the teacher's guidelines; creativity is discouraged or stifled.
- The student's learning style doesn't fit with the classroom environment and teaching methods.
- The subjects don't match the student's abilities and interests.

### Home Factors:

- There is an atmosphere of discord at home.
- The parents are too involved and controlling.
- The parents give the student too much freedom to determine how much time should be spent studying versus socializing.
- The student has too many responsibilities and stresses at home.
- The student is ill.

- The student feels overly pressured and doubts his or her abilities.
- The parents expect the student to work too hard and too long.
- The parents discourage the student from spending much time on schoolwork.

### Student Factors:

- The student has ADD or ADHD that has not been diagnosed.
- The student lacks proper study skills.
- The student is depressed or anxious and unable to concentrate.
- The student has poor self-esteem and has given up on himself or herself.
- The student abuses drugs and/or alcohol.
- The student is involved in too many extracurricular activities.
- The student has to work many hours to earn money for the family.
- The student fears success because it would mean being expected to continue a pattern of success. To avoid this, the student sets himself or herself up to fail.
- The student is agonizing over identity issues and has no energy left for focusing on studies.
- The student fears the independence that might result if he or she achieves success. Failure allows the student to remain dependent on his or her parents and other adults.



## HOW CAN AN UNDERACHIEVER BE HELPED?

The most important thing to do with a child or adolescent who is achieving below his or her ability level is to carefully assess the situation and determine the causes. This can be difficult to do, and you may want to seek the assistance of your child's teachers, school psychologist, or a mental health professional who specializes in working with children or adolescents.

The following are some of the steps to be taken: