

# Why Do Bright Children Underachieve?

## The Pressures They Feel

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**W**hy do half of gifted children underachieve? Why are between 10% and 20% of high school dropouts in the very superior range of tested ability? Of the top 5% of our high school graduates, why do 40% not graduate from college? What do case studies involving anxiety, suicide and eating disorders tell us about gifted children's feelings and the pressures they feel?

Parents have been blamed too frequently and too easily for the pressures felt by bright children. It is time to take a fresh look at the stresses that these children feel and the reasons for these stresses. It is time to relieve parental guilt and, instead, guide and support worried mothers and fathers. It is surely time to help their children.

### **The Main Pressures**

Keys to understanding children's pressures frequently come from bright adolescents who are struggling to understand their feelings. Behavioral observations by parents and teachers provide further insights into gifted children's emotional struggles.

Young adults, looking back on their own childhood, add insights which help us to understand the emotional issues that go with giftedness.

### **The Pressure to Be Extraordinary**

The intense feeling that one must be the smartest all the time shows itself in many ways. It is the child whose waving, enthusiastic hand indicates that he will willingly monopolize class

discussion with his display of brilliance, or the child who puts others down as dumb or stupid so as to feel intelligent. It is the youth who rushes through his work because "smart" has come to mean "quick and easy," and the one who cannot get started on her writing assignment because she cannot find a topic perfect enough to write about. It is the young person who argues endlessly with parents and teachers and appears to be completely blind to another's point of view.

The wish to feel extremely intelligent is important in motivating children to learn. But when self-expectations feel impossibly high, children may invent and discover many activities to avoid learning for fear that they can't live up to those expectations. These exercises in avoidance temporarily protect them from feeling dumb but result in many problem behaviors, adversely affect self-confidence and may, indeed, lead to underachievement.

### **The Pressure to Be Creative**

Every reader has experienced that sense of wanting to complete a project or activity in a unique or unusual way. That is, in miniature, the pressure that children feel to be different or to do something creative. Now multiply those feelings of pressure to be different by a thousand and you may have a sense of what some children feel when they get dressed in the morning, when they write a story or composition, or when they speak up in a class discussion. The inner pressure to be different is illustrated by statements such as these:

- *I would like math if I could have six apples and eight apples equal something different every time.*
- *I can't possibly hand my reports in on time. It always takes me longer to make them as unique as I want them to be.*

*Creative* for these children means being different and, most important, nonconforming. They see no area in school sufficiently unique for their infinitely personal expressions of being different.

### The Pressure to Be Popular

Parents consider being popular being “well-adjusted,” and they see that goal as more important than being intelligent. Elementary teachers call it “good peer relationships” and typically place it ahead of intellectual challenge. If bright children internalize these messages, they often do adjust well in elementary school and do not appear pressured. They learn to enjoy the comforts of social acceptance, and they play down their intelligence, even minimizing their use of extensive vocabulary.

This facade of “good adjustment” brings forth a different pressure by pre-adolescence. By then, adjustment translates to popularity. Becoming peer-adjusted forces children into a value system that may differ significantly from what their parents and teachers earlier described as social adjustment. Depending on the peer environment, the popular message may involve positive activities, or it may mean alcohol, drugs and sexual promiscuity. Popularity means not getting all As and no excitement about learning. For African-American children, being too interested in learning may include being chastised as “acting white.” Peers may call Native Americans “apples” (red on the outside, white on the inside).

There is a fine line that divides pressure and motivation. Pressure takes place when children don't believe they can achieve expected outcomes. Motivation occurs when children have learned the process that leads to realistic outcomes. Stated more simply, *motivation means that*

*children believe their hard work will achieve results.* The Rimm's Law (#2), which summarizes the appropriate achievement relationship, follows:

*Intellectually gifted children who rarely have challenge in the early years of school may equate smart with easy. They don't see a connection between effort and outcome. For adolescents who are called nerds if they make effort and are put down by their peers for that effort, the connection between effort and social outcomes does not exist. It isn't surprising that children protect themselves in defensive ways by not completing assignments, blaming teachers for their problems, acting “cool,” skipping classes and generally underachieving. Gifted and creative children internalize pressures easily, which may cause school problems and mental health problems. Understanding these pressures is the first step to helping them use their capabilities.*

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*Children will continue to achieve if they usually see the relationship between efforts and outcomes.*

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