



The Emotional Edge

Parenting Strategies to Motivate Underachieving Gifted Students

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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.

