

Doing Poorly on Purpose:
Underachievement and the Quest for Dignity

Presented by
Dr. James R Delisle

For

(INSERT SPONOSRING GROUP HERE)

(INSERT TOWN/LOCATION HERE)

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The Gifted Adolescent

One of the ironies of early adolescence is its contradictory nature. Between the ages of 10 and 14, kids want to be seen as unique individuals, but not so unique that they get odd looks from classmates. They want to be brave enough to test the limits of their new-felt freedoms, yet they still fear the wrath of a teacher or parent if they get caught crossing a threshold they should not have crossed. And they want to be excited about learning, but not so much so that they are seen as “gifted geeks”—stereotypical kids with thick glasses, stringy hair, straight As, no sense of style, and a preference for projects over people.

It is during the years of early adolescence that many gifted students make the choice, consciously or otherwise, as to which is more important—being smart or being popular. Many feel they can’t be both. So should they downplay the brains that everyone knows they’ve had since preschool? Should they keep their hands down in class even when they know the answers?

As a professor of education for gifted children for more than 20 years, as well as a teacher and counselor for gifted children in grades 6–8 for 11 years, I have learned that gifted kids want to be seen as children first, not as “brainiacs” who ace every test. They want to be perceived as average kids with gifts, not as superior kids with faults.

How can schools accommodate these students? Here are three things principals can do to make gifted adolescents comfortable.

Assign gifted students to teachers who like them. Look for teachers who understand the pressure of being labeled gifted, welcome student challenges, appreciate creativity, and encourage discussion about major issues. The easiest way to tell if a teacher is a strong candidate for working with gifted students is to observe the interactions of teachers and bright students. Which teachers do these students flock around before and after school? Which teachers are considered tough but fair by the smartest kids?

Talk with gifted students about how they differ from other kids. Gifted kids may feel uncomfortable with the term “gifted” because no one has ever taken the time to explain it to them. Although gifted students often distinguish them-

selves intellectually from classmates, both research and observation confirm additional social and emotional differences. For example, gifted children often prefer the company of those older than themselves, with whom they can better communicate. Also, gifted children often see success and failure through a different lens, with many considering B+ as a “bad grade.”

Principals should take time to talk to gifted kids about these differences. You might begin by sharing with them the “Eight Great Gripes of Gifted Kids” (see box) and ask them to respond to any of the items they feel are meaningful.

Don’t penalize gifted students by ignoring their excellence. One of the biggest

Eight Great Gripes of Gifted Kids

1. No one explains what being gifted is all about.
 2. School is too easy and too boring.
 3. Parents, teachers, and friends expect us to be perfect all the time.
 4. Friends who understand us are few and far between.
 5. Kids often tease us about being smart.
 6. We feel overwhelmed by the number of things we can do in life.
 7. We feel different and alienated.
 8. We worry about world problems and feel helpless to do anything about them.
- (Delisle & Galbraith 2002)

complaints heard from gifted students relates to the misapplication of cooperative learning. Because everyone in the group knows that the “smart kid” wants a good grade, they often are very willing to let him or her do the bulk of the work. A second major concern of gifted students is required classwork or homework that is little more than busy work for them. Sometimes gifted students refuse to do homework on basic skills they have already mastered, setting up power struggles with their teachers. A good solution is curriculum compacting (Winebrenner 2001), a teaching strategy that allows students to demonstrate their mastery before moving on to more intriguing and intellectually challenging projects.

Adolescents differ in many ways, and intellectual giftedness is just one of those ways. I once put up a graffiti board in an eighth-grade hallway for students to post their thoughts on a variety of issues. Under the title “Success is . . .” one of my students wrote, “reaching a manifest destiny.” Just below it, another student wrote, “not having to worry about what manifest destiny is.”

Principals have done a good job of understanding and addressing the needs of students with limited learning abilities. Now it is time to focus some attention toward those for whom learning comes readily. Then, in addition to focusing on leaving no child behind, you can also say that you are *keeping* no child behind. □

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Ten Traits and Behaviors That May Prevent Identification

1. Students may get easily bored with routine classwork. Some may say so, often and loudly. Others may tune out and say nothing.
2. Students may work intently on one area or subject, neglecting homework and classwork in other areas of study.
3. Students may use their advanced vocabularies to “retaliate” against those who are not so verbally well-endowed.
4. Students may get so excited about a discussion or topic that interests them that they monopolize the conversation or begin “preaching” about it, even to the teacher.
5. Students may get excited about a particular topic but, once initial interest is satisfied, resist doing additional work that relates to the topic. Their follow-through is weak.
6. Students may dislike or resent having to work with others who are not of equally high abilities, and they may express this dissatisfaction through words or loud sighs.
7. Students may possess a vast knowledge of many topics, and they may correct adults (and peers) they perceive as giving incorrect or incomplete information.
8. Students may use their advanced senses of humor and cunning to intimidate, manipulate, or humiliate others.
9. Students may be self-assured and passionate about particular political, social, or moral issues and state their views openly, distancing themselves from classmates who don’t share (or care about) these issues.
10. Students may prefer working independently and resent any adult who wants them to “toe the line” by following a specific procedure with which they disagree.

Some of these negative behaviors may be due to the gifted child having intellectual or emotional needs that are not being met at home or in school. While arrogant behavior should not be tolerated, and academic nonchalance should not be ignored, it’s good to know that the source of these issues might be intellectual frustration, not emotional disorder.

“The teachers would always say, ‘He isn’t doing the work we give him now, why should we give him new work?’ It was like being made to count the grains of sand in a bucket. . . . It’s easy to do $1 + 1$, then $5 + 8$. . . $18 + 5$ isn’t really any different; it’s still ‘sand’—the repetition of the same pattern. It would be different if they gave you new things. It could be like counting a bucket of diamonds. Hold them up to the light and you get different shapes, and glitters and shines.”
—Lee, age 16, from a juvenile detention center

Comfortably Numb: A New View of Underachievement

BY JIM DELISLE



ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN WINTON



It's really not fair that Joel is allowed to go on your field trip today. He hasn't done any of his assignments all week in his regular classes."

Any conversation that contains the words "It's not fair" is bound to work to the detriment of the child who is its focus. When that child is a gifted child and the work not completed is standard-issue curriculum that, truth be told, offers little intellectual sustenance, the result is universal disappointment. Classroom teachers are offended that a child so bright refuses to complete required work. The gifted child is confused: why is he or she being asked to do assignments that are void of purpose; and the gifted advocate is chagrined that

more than half a century after the first book on underachievement was published, little progress has been made in effectively addressing this condition.

As a teacher of gifted adolescents for much of my career, I have met many smart teenagers who opt out of performing highly in school. Usually, these kids are seen as smart, but not working "up to their potential." Frequently disengaged from curriculum that they believe focuses on others' needs, not their own, kids who are labeled as under-achievers continue to learn. However, their learning often takes place in areas apart from the curriculum (video games, animals, sports, theatre), in venues that don't look very much like school (at debates, with a mentor, while employed at the local bookstore or surf shop), or in that rare classroom where the teacher pronounces: "Joel, since the regular work is stuff you already know how to do, let's find something more engaging for you to study."

What can we learn about the dynamics of situations that cause underachievement to occur in the first place? How can we address the underlying issues involved in gifted students performing at low levels so that a win/lose situation is avoided? And what can we glean from five decades of research and practice on the topic of underachievement that can help Joel and countless others like him who may have to miss a field trip as a punishment for not playing well the game called school?

Cloud Cover

The biggest problem in addressing the issue of underachievement is that no two people can seem to agree where achievement ends and underachievement begins! Do we use a mathematical formula and gauge the child's IQ and compare it to everyday school achievement, calling it underachievement when a discrepancy is noted? If so, how big

a discrepancy? Or, do we look at school grades and determine that when a "B" is earned by someone capable of "A" work, that shows underachievement?

Further, not only can we not come to a common definition of underachievement, we do not even understand why it occurs. Perhaps underachievement is seen as the rebellious behavior of students who don't comprehend the importance of repetition in education, or as an illogical reaction to something so challenging that it might actually cause a student to think hard or earn a less than perfect grade. Interestingly, in one of the earliest reviews on underachievement (Raph and Tannenbaum, 1961) where more than 90 empirical studies of underachievement that had been conducted as early as 1931 were analyzed, the only conclusion the authors could make . . . was no conclusion. The results of the studies were contradictory, making generalizations about ways to prevent or reverse patterns of underachievement impossible. Sad to say, but almost 50 years later, the same situation exists: underachievement is a phenomenon as complex and confounding as are the children and adults to whom this label has been attached.

On the Nailing of Jell-O To The Wall

I was in school and I wanted to learn so much, but both students and teach-

ers seemed not to care and that bothered me. At 10 years old, I was frustrated because I was ready and willing to learn, but I observed teachers who knocked themselves out trying to teach kids who didn't want to learn, while ignoring me who wanted to learn so badly. (Turk and Campbell, 2002)

Even though no one wakes up in the morning and states "Gee . . . I can't wait to be bored today!" there is no question that boredom occurs—in school, at work, throughout life in general. When boredom occurs in our jobs, we have the ability to pack up and leave, finding employment that is more stimulating. When everyday life grows tedious, we take up a new hobby, seek a new relationship, or add spark to an existing one. In school, however, when a student is bored, the opportunity to pick up stakes and go home just isn't there. The bright, bored student tolerates hour after hour, month after month, feeling intellectually isolated. Eventually, unless some type of acceleration or enrichment is provided, the student succumbs to behaving in ways that cause others to apply the label of underachiever: "a smart kid who just won't apply himself." As in Pink Floyd's classic lyric, the student becomes comfortably numb. Learning in school occurs sporadically, if at all.

Perhaps the problem is that the term itself—underachievement—is too broad to apply to every case where high ability is not matched by equally strong performance. Consider these two example of children who have both been labeled as underachievers:

Cassie is a seventh grader who fears that she is not as smart as everyone claims she is. A quiet girl with a pleasant demeanor, Cassie wants to please her teachers. She pursues her work with caution, and when her teachers distribute assignments or projects, Cassie thinks to herself, "This is too hard. I can't do this." A perfectionist by nature, Cassie would rather "forget" a homework assignment than turn one in that is not flawless. Often, Cassie is her own worst enemy, for when she receives praise or a high grade she attributes it to "being lucky," yet when perfection is not attained, she internalizes this failure and calls herself dumb. Due to her erratic performance, teachers reluctantly award low grades to Cassie, telling her all the time, "We know you can do this, Cassie; you've just got to believe in yourself."

Doug is an eighth grader about whom teachers cannot agree. The math teacher complains that "Doug only does work when he feels like it. He may be smart, but he needs to play ball by my rules." The social studies teacher praises Doug's astute observations: "If ever I want a great discussion on a controversial topic, I turn to Doug. If you approach him just so, he's the ideal student." Doug dislikes "busy work" and teachers who assign it, and the threat of getting a low grade for lackluster performance doesn't bother Doug at all. He enjoys learning what he likes to learn, and Doug sees grades as artificial lures to try to hook him in to do something he wouldn't otherwise complete. So, when teachers say to him, "Doug, you have an 'A' average on tests and quizzes, but you have 12 missing homework assignments. That'll lower your grade to a 'D' ." Doug shrugs his shoulders and says "Whatever..." Most everyone is frustrated with Doug's sporadic performance except one person: Doug. He does know he's smart, and he realizes that if he played the game by the teachers' rules, he'd be a straight-A student. Somehow, though, no one has yet convinced Doug that getting straight A's when you are learning next to nothing is a worthwhile goal. Doug loves learning, but it doesn't necessarily follow that all of his 8th grade classrooms are places where lots of learning occurs.

Cassie and Doug both are labeled by their

Table 1. Characteristics of Underachievers and Selective Consumers

Underachievers	Selective Consumers
do not fully understand the causes or possible solutions to low grades	can explain both the problems and cures of their low grades
are dependent and reactive	are independent and proactive
tend to withdraw when faced with challenges	tend to rebel when faced with "busy work"
respect or fear authority figures	see most teachers as adversaries
need both structure and imposed limits	require less structure and more "breathing room"
exhibit uniformly weak school performance across subjects	exhibit performance that varies relative to the teacher and/or curriculum area
often require family intervention	can usually be dealt with by flexible classroom teachers
experience positive change usually over the long term	experience positive change sometimes "overnight"
are often perfectionistic despite no pressure from others to be so	are self-satisfied with whatever level of performance is attained
have a poor academic self-image	see themselves as academically competent

schools as underachievers, yet, despite similar report card grades, they are as different as chalk from cheese.

. . . Enter the Selective Consumer

In previous writings (Delisle, 1992; Delisle and Galbraith, 2002), I have distinguished between the Cassies and Dougs of the world by calling one (Cassie) an underachiever and the other (Doug) a "selective consumer." The importance of this distinction can best

be illustrated by comparing both the personal qualities and the motivational intentions of the two. Table 1 shows these differences at a glance:

It should be obvious that categorizing these students together and attempting to change their school performance or attitude by using the same strategies and techniques will often result in either outright failure or only short-term improvement. For example, using a contract that specifies the expected outcomes of

an assignment and provides firm deadlines will be perceived by the underachiever as an aid to academic success while a similar contract with a selective consumer will be looked at as yet another attempt at coercive education! Further, telling an underachieving student that she can do a project on any topic might cause anxiety and aimless topic searching while providing this option to a selective consumer often results in a successful exploration of an area of the student's interest.

In her classic text on underachievement (1980), Joanne Rand Whitmore proposes a variety of strategies for working with underachieving students that she categorizes as supportive, intrinsic and remedial, defined thusly:

Supportive strategies: "those which affirm the worth of the child in the classroom and convey the promise of greater potential and success yet to be discovered and enjoyed." (p. 256)

Intrinsic strategies: "strategies . . . designed to develop intrinsic achievement motivation through the child's discovery of rewards available to him as a result of efforts to learn, achieve and contribute to the group." (p. 265)

Remedial strategies: "those employed to improve the student's academic performance in an area of learning in which he has evidenced difficulty learning, has experienced a sense of failure, and has become unmotivated to engage in learning tasks." (p. 271)

In considering the cases of Cassie and Doug strategies that may be effective could include ideas found on Table 2 (Delisle and Galbraith, 2002). A note of caution, however: the possibilities for working effectively with both students who underachieve and those who fit the cluster of attributes more common to the selective consumer are rife with possibilities . . . which means that they are also the feeding ground for failure. For example, a student like Cassie will need the tender loving care of a teacher who understands and respects the fears about the abilities everyone (except Cassie) believes she has. Curriculum will matter, but only after a relationship of trust is established and maintained. For students like Doug, a successful teacher will be one who is willing to erase the artificial barrier often existing between teacher and student, alternating these roles as time passes and school options are attempted. Cassie will be more forgiving than Doug when a teacher "messes up," but Doug will be more forthcoming in letting you know that you are no longer teaching

Table 2. Supportive Strategies for Underachievers and Selective Consumers

Supportive Strategies	
For Selective Consumers	For Underachievers
Eliminate (or reduce significantly) work already mastered.	Hold class meetings and one-on-one to discuss student concerns/progress.
Allow independent study on topics of interest and teach through problem-solving methods.	Use predictable and concrete instructional method.
Establish a non-authoritarian classroom atmosphere where student/teacher roles sometimes blur.	Establish a directive classroom atmosphere with clearly delineated teacher and student roles.
Permit students to prove academic competence via multiple methods.	Establish daily/weekly/monthly written contracts of completed and assessed work.
Intrinsic Strategies	
For Selective Consumers	For Underachievers
Allow students to help determine class rules and procedures.	Teacher determines both rules and rewards structure.
Encourage students to design assessment methods that go beyond grading by letters/percents.	Allow students to evaluate and grade their own work before discussing it with teachers.
Encourage open dialogue about the merits and worth of particular assignments.	Engage in frequent and positive contact with student and family regarding academic progress.
Schedule regular meetings to review "how things are going," from the student's perspective.	Include praise for self-initiating behaviors and teacher-led discussion about progress.
Remedial Strategies	
For Selective Consumers	For Underachievers
Establish self-selected weekly goals for basic skill acquisition, set jointly by student and teacher.	Allow students to grade their own assignments immediately upon completion.
Provide private instruction/tutoring in areas of academic need.	Encourage peer tutoring of younger students in areas of strength or interest.
Use humor and personal example to approach academic weaknesses.	Provide small-group instruction in areas of basic skill deficiency.
Teach students about learning styles/preferences and incorporate these into learning tasks.	Encourage students to work on projects/tasks that have no grades or assessment at all.

From Delisle and Galbraith, 2002

him. Still, the ultimate benefit of adjusting both our demeanor and our demands to those that will allow us to reach previously unreachable kids is rich with rewards. Consider the case of a real Doug— Doug Campbell.

Spinning Gold From Straw

Doug Campbell, now a 24-year-old college graduate, went through much of school comfortably numb. Breezing through classes that had no meaning took its toll early on Doug, a student identified as twice exceptional (gifted and ADHD) in preschool. In two of the most stunning articles of giftedness I have read in quite some time (Turk and Campbell, 2003; Turk and Campbell, 2002), Doug Campbell and his teacher of seven years, Thomas Turk, reveal the attitudes and approaches to schooling it took to reach Doug, a highly gifted individual with a precocious ability to detect when the educational emperor was wearing no clothes. It started with small incidents of trying to share his intellectual excitement. . . that went unanswered:

"In grade school my hand was always up with the answer to a question and teachers always avoided me; they always wanted someone besides Doug to answer" (2002, p. 49).

As middle school approached, Doug's disenchantment with school escalated into confrontational exchanges between himself and his teachers:

Since the teachers would not let me talk, I ended up correcting their mistakes. When I realized they weren't going to let me talk, I would sit in the back and I raised my hand only when they made a mistake. . . . not all teachers were adversaries: several encouraged, supported, and challenged my intelligence. Many tried to help yet most gave up. (2002, p. 50)

By the time high school began for Doug, he had virtually written off the education system as personally purposeless:

I found high school academics to be a joke, so I used all my extra time to cultivate my social life. I went to a lot of parties because I didn't have to learn. This was a dangerous thing for a person my age to have so much free time on his hands. (2002, p. 53)

Still . . . Doug learned:

"I started reading Machiavelli, Dante, Shakespeare—they had nothing to do with class, but I read anyway. It got to the point where I couldn't bring myself to do anything the

teachers wanted me to do" (2002, p. 53).

Not unexpectedly, this academic despondency led to the temporary refuge of substance abuse:

"Weed started out as an escape from my anger. I would come home from school upset, feeling that I had wasted an entire day. But, when I went to class stoned, I didn't notice; I didn't care" (2002, p. 53).

This downward spiral was arrested by Thomas Turk, a teacher who first met Doug in 9th grade and taught him for seven years (including college) in English, history and four years of Latin. Under Turk's caring guidance, and using many of the interventions that parallel the supportive, intrinsic and remedial strategies highlighted earlier, this student/teacher partnership created in Doug a new sense of purpose to move forward and succeed. Outside interventions, including group counseling, time management skills acquisition, physical exercise, and the effective use of medication to address his ADHD combined with Turk's belief in Doug to transform a life. On the last day of Doug's sophomore year in college, Turk received a call:

At ten minutes after 5:00 on deadline day when University offices had closed, I got a call from (Doug) telling me that everything was done. . . it was the best news I had heard from him in a long time. But, there was more: He told me that he had achieved a 4.0 grade-point average. I knew right then that this was a major benchmark in his life. I felt we had come out of Plato's Cave into the sunlight. (2003, p. 45)

In the above paragraph, I took the liberty of doing something the first author of this article did not do: I put the word "we" in boldface; for, indeed, Doug did not succeed alone. The guidance and care of a teacher who believed in Doug enough—and for long enough—to see the gold beneath the straw resulted in a story of success that could have ended otherwise, as another sad chapter in the life history of the "kid who got away," slipping through the cracks of an educational system that would rather ignore Doug than address his multiple needs.

On Righting Wrongs

One of my favorite quotes is from novelist John Cheever: "How far one little candle throws its beam. So shines a good deed in a naughty world."

Whenever a teacher takes the time to put aside the traditional teacher roles to address per-

sonal and meaningful student concerns, a candle is lit. Whenever a teacher swallows hard and keeps inside the admonition to an underachieving child to "work up to your potential . . ." and, instead, reaches out to listen, rather than preach, the beam shines brighter. Whenever a teacher takes the time to see education from an angry, rebellious, unmotivated or insecure student's point of view, the naughty world becomes a slightly nicer place.

With all students, these are the keys to mutual success. With children whom I call underachievers or selective consumers, the road is tougher, the path to success less clear, the obstacles more prominent, and the struggles more exhausting. But then, with glorious hope underpinning all the hard work, Doug will emerge as a 4.0 student with a smile on his face, and Cassie will begin tomorrow more confident in her success than she ever thought possible. No longer comfortably numb. . . simply comfortable. ■

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**More Than a Test Score:
Teens Talk About Being Gifted, Talented or Otherwise Extra-Ordinary
Robert A. Schultz and James R. Delisle
Free Spirit Publishing, 2006**

Chapter 1: Giftedness: what's it all about?

The term 'gifted' seems to be used more loosely than it used to be and I think it should be used more strictly.
Boy, 14, Ohio

Being gifted, I can form connections in ways that your average student can't. When I learn something in English class, I have a much better chance of putting two and two together. Boy, 18, Virginia.

In response to the question about hiding one's own giftedness, a 14 year-old wrote, "Sometimes, I want to be . . .relatively normal. But it doesn't work. I have to be me." How do you rate this young person's comfort level with being gifted around friends, and what might you say to this kid about this statement? While you're at it, distinguish between "normal" (which lots of gifted teens appear to think they are not) and "typical". Which word better describes how the gifted person is perceived in relation to others?

Chapter 2: Friends, classmates and fitting in

Sometimes, a phone call that begins 'Hi, can you explain the science homework?' leaves me feeling like I have a big sign on my back claiming that I don't want friends, just questions. Girl, 14, Oklahoma

I have never felt comfortable discussing being gifted face-to-face, and as early as 2nd grade, I remember fervently wishing that I could fully understand how I was gifted. Boy, 14, Florida

Poet e.e. cummings once said, 'To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best to make you everybody else means fighting the hardest human battle ever and to never stop fighting.' we're pretty sure that cummings was not talking specifically about giftedness, for his message would be the same for anyone whose beliefs or lifestyles go against what most people would see as 'normal'. Still, in considering cummings' words, think of times in your own life when you have had to stand up for your convictions against tremendous social odds. What price did you pay? Was it worth it?

Chapter 3: Expectations--yours and others

I don't expect much from a person with my abilities. I would expect good grades like As and Bs, but if they get a C, I'd understand as long as they tried their hardest. If they don't try their hardest, then I wouldn't understand the C. Boy, 13, New York

Expectations are probably the most annoying aspect of life. EVERYONE thinks, 'Oh, she's so smart and knows everything.' Does it have to be EVERYTHING? I am not all knowing! Girl, 14, New Jersey

In some schools, alphabetic or numeric grades are not given to students. Instead, students put together portfolios of work that encapsulate what they learned about particular subjects. Would you prefer going to a school that used this system of student evaluation, or do you think the A -F structure of grading is preferable? Which system of grading better prepares you for a world of work that does not give employees "report cards" in the same way that schools do?

Chapter 4: When schools work

A perfect school day is walking in and finding a sub. who does not know there was homework to turn in. Girl, 13, Texas

A teacher who is really interested in what s/he teaches is so much easier to listen to than one who is following some schedule just to make me do well on tests. I get excited when a teacher not only answers questions, but does so comprehensively. Boy, 15, North Carolina

Define 'fun' as it relates to schoolwork. Many students comment that teachers make school interesting by making it 'fun', yet this loosely-defined term can mean many things to many people. Does 'fun' imply playing Twister to learn vocabulary, or jumping up and down on elevators to see the effects of force on the human body? Or, does 'fun' mean more intriguing lessons that are spiced with hands-on activities, challenging ideas and resources, and at least some time to

explore your own interests? Is there a difference between learning that is 'fun' and simply playing games?

Chapter 5: When schools fail

I love being challenged, but sometimes, I want a break, which I can't have. Last Wednesday was the first time I can remember in two years when I had no homework due the next day. Girl, 14, Washington

Once in 6th grade, my teacher was explaining some math and I fell asleep while he was talking because I already knew what he was talking about. He yelled at me and ordered me to wake up. I did the work and got 100%. He got even madder at me that I wasn't paying attention but still got a good grade. Boy, 14, Utah

We have always lived by the maxim that if you are bored, you are probably pretty boring to be around. Boredom is often used as a weapon against teachers, yet it is often tough to pinpoint the causes of boredom. Depending on your perspective, work that is too easy, too hard, not relevant, or not of interest to you may cause it to be boring. Too, when kids say they are bored, we often ask them to H.A.L.T.: are you Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired? If so, take care to respond to the situation that is making you HALT, and see if the boredom is alleviated, even a little.

Chapter 6: Families: Helping hands from home

I sometimes think my mom is sick of my good grades. Sometimes, I catch her saying, 'Can't you just make a 'C' once in a while?' (I don't even know if I could if I tried.) Girl, 15, Indiana

My parents tried to introduce me to new things when I was younger, and I appreciate that. They should have introduced me earlier to theology and philosophy, but another relative helped me to discover more about those topics. Boy, 17, Kansas

Compliments seem to be a double-edged sword: we like to receive them, but only in the right setting (which is often in private, not public). If you could design a set of 'rules' for giving compliments, what rules would be on our list? Also, virtually all of the comments in this section refer to compliments or bragging done by parents. How do you feel when you get complimented by a friend? A teacher? A sibling? Is the effect any different than it is when complimented by a parent? If so, why is the impact different?

Chapter 7: Melange--Outtakes and Elders

There are many things that need to happen if schools are to improve, but I am going to talk about attitude adjustments that teachers and students need to have. First, teachers need to realize that students are there to learn. This may sound obvious, but most of the people I know in school harbor no illusions that they are learning anything. If the teachers focused on student learning and retaining concepts, instead of just memorizing facts to pass a test they will soon forget, that would be a nice start. Girl, 16, Georgia

Even today, I routinely conceal the extent of my intellectual excitement. This is not something I talk about much. Mostly, though, I probably didn't make enough in the way of concessions for social purposes. A sense of isolation, I suppose, leads some to betray themselves and others to entrench unwisely. I was certainly often intolerably arrogant and superior towards my peers as a teenager. I now realize that you have to meet people half-way. Female, 24, England

What should a gifted person do to lead a complete life? Here lies my recipe: Be happy. Follow your muse. Realize the world is a marvelous garden, rich and exotic, no matter where you live. Develop an inner dialog that is constantly evaluating, wondering, testing, and making connections. Do many things in life that make it a journey, such as Marcus Aurelius might have said, 'worthy of a human being.' Push the boundaries. Don't live in a box. Don't accept limits. Find challenges. Examine life. Try and fail. Try again and succeed. (Maybe someday I'll learn to become a good bike mechanic.) Male, 51, Iowa

One 44 year-old respondent mentioned that she was a combination of Vincent van Gogh, Erma Bombeck, Mitch Miller, Mother Teresa, Bette Midler and Louisa May Alcott--a collection of personalities, strengths and quirks that, somehow, added up to make her unique. How about you? In looking at the life you are leading, the goals for which you are striving, the idiosyncrasies of your own personality, and the talents that make you stand out in a crowd of others, which historical, literary, musical, or athletic others remind you of you? Compile a list of at least four famous people and compare these with those of other friends who might enjoy this exercise in historical fiction!

PARENTING Q & A



Parenting Q & A (question and answer) is a regular column in which answer readers' questions by experts in the field of raising and/or teaching high-potential children. In each issue a different expert will address readers' concerns. If you have a question you would like answered in this column, please send it to: Dr. James Alvino, Editor-in-Chief, PHP magazine, 4302 Pickwick Circle, #319, Huntington Beach, CA 92649. Neither PHP nor NAGC necessarily endorse the opinions offered in this column.

expert answers to your questions

This month meet... *Jim Delisle*

*Jim Delisle is a less-than perfect professor of education at Kent (OH) State University, a flawed part-time teacher of middle school gifted children, and a generally successful parent and husband. He has written or co-authored eight books, including *Once Upon a Mind: The Stories and Scholars of Gifted Child Education* (Harcourt Brace, 1999).*



REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

How Parents Unintentionally Undermine A Gifted Child's Self-Worth

QUESTION

A reader from Erie, PA, writes: Sometimes I feel that I say and do the exact opposite of what I should be doing with my gifted child. I don't want to undermine my child's sense of self-worth, but it seems to happen. What kind of advice can you give to help me say and do the "right" things for my gifted child?

ANSWER

Imagine if being a parent was an easy job. You would speak, your child would listen, and every night would end like a rendition of John-Boy's goodnight on *The Waltons*. Do I have to tell you this is not going to happen?

Enter the gifted child: You know, the kid who asks why snow doesn't melt white if chocolate melts brown and butter melts yellow . . . the one who asks at age 3, "Mommy, do people feel the same way right before they're born as they do right after they die?" . . . the one who sees the grays of life while remaining unabashedly oblivious to the blacks and whites of scheduled bedtimes and required homework.

Gifted children and their parents can come to loggerheads when the topic is discipline, school, household tasks and responsibilities, or the relative benefits of attending to PlayStation® for hours on end. But there are ways to circumvent the verbal tanglings that often erupt when the parent of a gifted child tries to coax a reluctant son or daughter into believing or acting in a certain way.

As a primer from one who has been there — I have taught gifted children for 20 years and raised one at home — here are some things to remember not to do and not to say when you talk with your gifted child.

"YOU'RE NOT WORKING UP TO YOUR POTENTIAL."

Is there a more stifling, inhibiting, or demeaning comment as this? It is often said with the best of intentions — to get the gifted child to perform better in school. But there's a snag. No one ever explains to the gifted child what "working up to your potential" actually means. No one ever says, "OK . . . you've reached your potential, so you can relax now." Success is rarely defined for gifted children, leaving them without directions for success. Like a ship in dark waters seeking a safe harbor,

the gifted child floats adrift among a sea of unexplained expectations.

But consider this: Which of us, as adults, is working up to our potential? Which of us is capitalizing on our innate gifts or learned talents to such degrees that everyone around us says “Wow!”? My guess is that very few adults would admit to working up to their potential, blaming the constraints of too little time and too many responsibilities as the rationale behind their less-than-perfect performance. Well, guess what? Many of our gifted children feel these same constraints.

My advice? Lay off the “potential” theme and start asking more refined questions like “What did you learn in school today?” instead of “What did you earn in school today?” By realizing that “potential” is a term that exists individually, in the eyes of the beholder, we may come to appreciate our children more in the present tense than in the future tense.

“YOU DID A GREAT JOB IN SCHOOL, BUT . . .”

It is natural for people to want to reward excellence in others about whom they care. Unfortunately, it is also human nature to couple this praise with an urge to do better. Thus, a glowing comment like “you’re doing a great job in school” is often reduced to a faint ember by adding, “. . . but if you worked a little harder, you could probably earn high honors.”

Ouch! That burns! That single word — “but” — is one of our language’s greatest natural depressants, as it diminishes the importance and worth of the genuine praise that came before it. Indeed, when a compliment is followed with a “but” statement, it really becomes a “kick in the butt,” erasing any semblance of pride that a child might have accepted as credit for a job well done.

The solution, though, is easy: just be quiet! When you give your child a compliment (“I like your outfit”; “Your project shows a lot of effort”), leave it at that. Period. Don’t complicate matters by inserting an urge to improve as a follow-up statement. Should you strongly feel that you need to prod your child to do better despite some success, that’s fine — just do it at another time (the next day or the next week), and do not tie it in with that prior praise that was so well deserved.

“THIS’LL BE EASY FOR A SMART KID LIKE YOU.”

Here’s the scenario: Your child has decided to take an advanced class at school and you’re very pleased, especially because the subject is calculus — your specialty. Finally, you will be able to help with homework in a meaningful way!

So, the class begins and, shortly thereafter, so do some problems. What used to be learned without even opening a textbook is now a struggle for your child. The content is more difficult, the challenges more frequent, the self-doubts more prominent than ever.

“Time for me to intervene,” you think. And you do. Dredging up your knowledge of things mathematical, you begin to help your child with homework. When your captive student hits

a snag, you arm yourself with advice and suggestions. But it doesn’t help; your child is still struggling to grasp a concept that you mastered long ago.

So you give some advice that you are sure will work. Hugging your child’s shoulder, you say, “This’ll be easy for a smart kid like you.” Then, you watch as your child walks away in disgust, anger, or frustration, and you wonder what you did that was so wrong.

Unintentionally, you made a smart kid feel dumb by suggesting that a concept that was personally difficult to grasp was actually a piece of cake. Your child’s inner thought: “Hey, if this stuff is so easy and I can’t get it, I must be pretty dumb. Maybe I should drop this class.” It may have been inadvertent, but the words still sting, especially if your child was honestly trying to grasp an elusive concept that was crystal clear to you.

Instead, try saying something like, “I can see that you’re having some trouble in understanding this concept. That’s OK. Together, we’ll work on it until you feel comfortable with it.” This message gives validity to your child’s efforts and merit to your child’s belief that learning something new can be difficult. Also, it validates the idea that just because you are gifted that does not mean that everything comes as naturally as swimming does to a fish.

“I DON’T CARE ABOUT YOUR GRADES AS LONG AS YOU DO YOUR BEST.”

Every parent I know, and virtually every student, too, utters this phrase at some time. It is meant to provide comfort to a child who does not gain an automatic grasp of a concept or idea. The effect of this statement, though, might be quite the opposite, because if a child thinks he or she always has to do the best work possible — whether in academics, creative endeavors, sports, whatever — then this leaves little room for mistakes.

Think of it this way: do you always “do your best” in all areas of everyday life — like work, cleaning, or exercising daily? Or, is it sometimes OK to have a house that is 70 percent tidy or a four-day-a-week workout schedule? By sending a message that high grades do not always count, but that high efforts always do, you are leaving too little room for the very real pleasure of just being average. Trust me, as a mechanic I am mediocre and, as an adult, I have the privilege and the prerogative of saying those two magic words — “Hire out!” — when faced with a task that I definitely do not want to exert my best efforts in completing. Your child needs the same degree of freedom that you and I have when it comes to not being a top performer in everything he or she touches.

Be cautious of your admonitions to always do your best. Instead, ask your child to be selective in his or her attempts at excellence, because there just is not enough time in anyone’s life to excel at everything. Remember, less than perfection is more than acceptable.


(continued on page 30)

PARENTING Q & A

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A FINAL WORD

As parents, there are many things we do and say that we wish we could take back later. We, like our kids, are imperfect beings, and it would be silly to believe that even our best-intended efforts are always interpreted in ways we meant them. This primer on some of the “don’ts” of parenting is not meant to make you feel guilty or dumb — only human. If you find yourself falling victim to using one of the above statements, just backpedal a little bit and be honest with your child: “Sammy, I’m sorry if what I said made you feel bad. Let’s go back and try again.”

An apology, if meant sincerely, can erase the impact of prior statements or actions, especially if your child understands what should be obvious: that without the benefit of a sure-fire recipe book on child-rearing, there will be an “oops!” or two along the road. In an odd sort of way, that’s comforting. 

Consider what you have learned in our course this semester--in our class meetings, from our guest speakers, through your outside activities related to education, and in your classroom-based field experiences. Then, with these experiences as your base, answer the following:

1. Who (and what) has *engaged* you?
2. Who (and what) has **enraged** you?
3. Who (and what) has **INSPIRED** you?
4. Who (and what) has *confused* you?
5. Who (and what) **worries** you?
6. Who (and what) makes you **excited** about becoming a teacher?
7. Who (and what) causes you **anxiety** about the thought of becoming a teacher?
8. What **do you know** now about schools, kids and/or teaching that you didn't know at the beginning of the semester?
9. What **don't you know yet** about schools, kids and/or teaching that you still need to learn?
10. On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high) how **confident** are you in your career choice of education? Is this score *higher* or **Lower** than it was at the beginning of this term? *Explain yourself.*

High Achievers: What Price Do They Pay?

Learn to Raise High Achievers Without Breaking Their Spirits

BY CARLETON KENDRICK

They come to me with SATs pushing 1600. The valedictorians. The student leaders. The super-jocks. They're applying to Harvard. They're the children you want your kids to become.

For the past 17 years, I've been an alumni interviewer for Harvard. As part of its admissions process, Harvard gives applicants an opportunity to meet with one of its alumni. To personalize the process. To allow its applicants to "come alive," apart from their strategically packaged portfolios.

Acknowledging that most teens walk into these interviews with understandably heightened anxiety, my initial focus is on helping them exhale their fears and worries about impressing me. "We're here so that Harvard can get to know you a little better," I tell them. "There are no right or wrong answers. We're just going to chat for a while."

I try to get beyond their Miss America-like, rehearsed responses. I'm looking for clues as to whether they'd make considerate roommates, inquisitive scholars and generous contributors to Harvard's community. Most often, these frightened, pressured high achievers have trouble finding their own voice. Instead, I hear them speak in the success-oriented words of their parents, teachers and college coaches.

Running on Empty

He listed cross-country as a sport he took up in his junior year. No athletic endeavors had preceded his high school running. I asked John (all names have been changed) what had drawn him to distance running. He replied, "My school counselor told me it would look good on my transcript. Time was running out, and my junior year was the last

year I could get a sport in before I sent in my applications. I joined cross-country because everyone makes it who tries out." "Do you like running? Does it give you pleasure?" I asked. "No," was his hollow reply.

Peter had scored two 800s on his SATs and was recognized as a National Merit Scholar. I asked whether he had ever challenged any of his English teachers' opinions in class. Looking down at the floor, he spoke softly. "Sure, I used to disagree lots of times. But every time I'd disagree with a teacher or a textbook, I'd get marked down for it. I learned it's better to tell teachers what they want to hear." Sadly, there was no anger or disappointment in his voice.

Sarah, class valedictorian and winner of numerous, prestigious math and science awards, spoke with a dull voice about her academic triumphs and her future. "Math and science have always been easy for me. I don't like them nearly as much as literature, but they're what I do best. I guess I'll major in them in college, get a graduate degree in them and then get an engineering job and get married. That's what my parents expect. Sarah was 17, a broken sparrow, dying to be middle-aged.

Stressed for Success

Heard enough? I have. Over the past two decades, the children I've interviewed have become progressively more packaged for success. They've been advised and scared into believing that school's only purpose is to get the grades that will gain them admission into an elite college. College must then result in a degree that translates into a high-paying job and a secure financial future. It's no wonder that a recently released

American Council on Education survey of more than 348,000 college freshmen reports that, "Academic credentials, rather than a love of learning, seem to be their motivation." Shame on us all.

What Parents Can Do

How do you raise kids to be high achievers without their suffering anxiety, dread and abject resignation?

Stop hurrying and stealing their childhood, structuring and scheduling their every waking moment. Read or re-read David Elkind's cautionary book, "The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon" (Perseus Books).

Don't frighten them into believing in your master plan for academic and career success. Begin telling them as preschoolers that you love and admire them for who they are, not for the grades and achievements that they bring you. Encourage their own natural academic and extracurricular interests, regardless of whether they are deemed portfolio-advisable by costly college "handlers."

Urge them to volunteer and to serve others, and do so together as part of your family's values, not because it will look good on their college transcripts.

In short, love and support them as they challenge and search for themselves, fulfill their dreams and become the people they choose to be.

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Carleton Kendrick is a family therapist and a contributing writer to <http://familyeducation.com>. For more advice about teen stress and raising high achievers, visit www.schoolcounselor.org.

Note to school counselors: Each issue of *ASCA School Counselor* magazine contains a column targeted to parents. Please feel free to copy this page and send it home with your students to provide to their parents with your compliments.

From your child's school counselor:

Gifted Adults: Their Characteristics & Emotions

Annemarie Roeper

- 1~Gifted adults differ intellectually from others
~~--sophisticated, global-thinkers with a penchant for complexity of~~
thought
- 2~Gifted adults retain childlike emotions
--they bring a childlike delight to discoveries and life in general
- 3~Gifted adults' views of self differ from others' views
of them
--others may ignore them, elevate them, or disparage them
- 4~Gifted adults are often driven by their giftedness
--they have no choice but to think, explore, create, and strive
- 5~Gifted adults need time for solitude
--daydreaming and "alone time" are vital to their well-being
- 6~Gifted adults search for meaning and purpose
--in themselves and others, they need to ask "why?"
- 7~Gifted adults have many diverse abilities & interests
--careers and hobbies are fleeting: "There is so much to learn and do!"
- 8~Gifted adults have strong senses of justice &
morality
--they live to serve; they distinguish justice from equality