

# Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades And What You Can Do About It

By Dr. Sylvia Rimm

Crown Publishers (1995)

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Reading Dr. Sylvia Rimm's book, [\*Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades\*](#), gives parents of twice-exceptional children a great deal to ponder. It's not because this child psychologist and clinical medical school professor has written about 2e kids – she hasn't. The focus of her book is underachieving students in general – of various ages and levels of intelligence, and with or without learning issues. What the author does address is the psychology of the relationships that exist among three groups of players in the underachievement game: parents, teachers, and children. She explains how the direction these relationships take, from early on, can lead a child to underachievement.

On the topic of the parent/child relationship, Rimm makes some statements that might especially apply to 2e families. She explains, "Most...underachievement risks develop in the first years of life. Attention addiction caused by a child's being overwelcomed, gifted, handicapped, or ill may begin the problem." She also states, "Excessive power in childhood is characteristic of all underachievers. Although these children have too much power, they typically feel as if they have too little. Their power is directed toward manipulating others in order to avoid responsibility rather than toward actual accomplishment." Although the seeds of underachievement are sown early, Rimm points out that it may not appear as a problem until as late as high school or college.

In discussing the teacher/child relationship, Rimm observes that symptoms of underachievement "are easily misidentified as immaturity, parent pressure, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, or emotional disturbances." [See [Sylvia Rimm's chart](#) on how to tell a dependent child from one who has a disability.] She explains that working with underachieving students may be especially frustrating for teachers because "the typical teaching approaches that are effective with achieving children may not work for underachievers." Students who achieve "are much more receptive than underachievers to a large variety of effective teaching methods."

Being gifted presents its own risks for underachievement, according to Rimm. She explains that "insufficient challenge" in the classroom can "actually initiate and maintain underachievement." What can then develop is "parent-school antagonism," which can result in children receiving "the message from their parents that because school is not meeting their educational needs, [the students] are not expected to complete boring assignments." What may happen in turn, according to Rimm, is that "teachers may inform the children that their high abilities are imaginary because their school performance is so poor." Here is a vicious cycle in which, unfortunately, far too many 2e families have been caught.

Is there help for the underachieving student? In many cases there is, according to Dr. Rimm. She explains that underachievement is learned. Therefore, reversing underachievement requires learning new behaviors, habits, and attitudes. This learning involves not only the child, but the parents and teachers as well.

The book describes a three-pronged approach to reversing underachievement that Rimm refers to as her Trifocal Model. She claims that by using this approach she is successful in reversing underachievement in four out of five children at her Family Achievement Clinic in Ohio. In some cases it requires the help of a psychologist, while in others it just takes

parents and teachers working together with the child. The model consists of the steps shown below.

<b>Sylvia Rimm's Trifocal Model</b>		
<b>Step</b>	<b>Goal</b>	<b>Achieved by...</b>
1. Assessment	To determine the nature and extent of the student's underachievement	Using tests, inventories, questioning, and observation
2. Communication	To get parents, teachers, and students to work together	Meeting to discuss issues and exchange information with respect and without blame
3. Changing expectations	To change the expectations of the students, parents, and teachers to match a new level of achievement	Setting realistic goals and expressing confidence in the student's ability to meet them
4. Identification	To find a good role model for the student	Selecting a positive and achievement-oriented adult with whom the student can identify
5. Correction of deficiencies	To overcome any skill deficiencies that might exist	Providing short-term tutoring
6. Modifications at home, school	To make the changes at home and at school needed to stop the student's manipulative behavior	Reinforcing achieving behaviors

In addition to presenting the Trifocal Model, Dr. Rimm fills her nearly 400-page book with a considerable number of parent pointers, teacher tips, checklists, and other forms of useful and straightforward information. Readers will find the heart of her message boiled down to the twelve Rimm's Laws of Achievement, which she presents at the start of the book and refers to throughout the book. She believes that keeping these laws in mind will help parents and teachers alike focus their efforts on helping children achieve all that they are capable of.

*Dr. Sylvia Rimm is a child psychologist, professor, author, and speaker. She directs Family Achievement Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio. Additional information on underachievement is available in the [coverage of her session at the 2003 NAGC conference](#). Also see the review of her book [Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades](#).*

## Ways to Discriminate Between Dependence and Disability\*

Dependence		Disability
<i>The child:</i>		<i>The child:</i>
1	regularly asks for explanations, regardless of subject matter.	asks for explanations in difficult subjects.
2	asks for explanation of instructions, regardless of style used, auditory or visual.	asks for explanation of instructions only when given in one style, not both.
3	asks questions that appear aimed at getting adult attention.	asks questions to gain information specific to the material and then works efficiently.
4	is disorganized or works slowly until a meaningful reward is presented as motivation.	continues to be disorganized or work slowly despite a motivating reward.
5	works only when an adult is nearby.	works independently once the process is clearly explained.
6	is capable of learning the material based on individually administered measures of ability. (Test scores improve with tester encouragement and support. Group measures may not indicate good abilities or skills).	shows a lack of specific abilities or skills on both individual and group measures. (Encouragement has not significant effect on scores.)
7	regularly exhibits "poor me" body language when new work is presented. Adult attention eases the symptoms.	exhibits "poor me" body language only with instructions or assignments in specific disability areas and accepts challenges in areas of strength.
8	displays these behaviors at home, according to parents: whining, complaining, attention getting, temper tantrums, poor sportsmanship	may display the same behaviors at home, but the behaviors tend to be more sporadic, particularly the whining and complaining
9	displays "poor me" behavior with only one parent or some teachers and with others functions fairly well independently.	may display "poor me" behavior with select adults, but performs inadequately even when behavior is acceptable.
10	learns only when given one-to-one instruction but will not learn in groups even when instructional mode is varied.	may learn more quickly in a one-to-one setting, but will also learn efficiently in a group provided the child's disability is taken into consideration.

\* This chart has been excerpted and condensed with permission from the book *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades and What You Can Do about It*, by Dr. Sylvia Rimm (Crown Publishers, 1995).