

# Boosting the Adolescent Underachiever

How Parents Can Change a  
"C" Student into an "A" Student

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“C” Student into an “A” Student

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# Introduction

## Trying Everything

The following story is repeated by countless parents throughout the school year and even during summer vacation. A distraught parent seeks help to improve the scholastic performance of her child. Most common sense advice contains elements that, in the proper combination and setting, will produce limited results with some kids. Trudi Richards, a marketing expert and mother of an adolescent underachiever, feels she's heard and possibly tried all the suggestions available.

TRUDI: I was told he was spoiled, so I set about to unspoil him.

WRITER: How did you try to do that?

TRUDI: I discussed responsibility with him. I showed him that his father and I both had responsibilities that were obligatory. Some we didn't mind at all and some we weren't too happy about, but, nevertheless, we had to face them. Some tasks, which may not be fun, just have to be done. As an adult, you must do them. That's the way life is.

WRITER: How did he respond?

TRUDI: He said he understood.

WRITER: You then discussed his responsibilities?

TRUDI: Yes. There were some chores at home he had to do. Furthermore, he had to complete them at certain times, not when he felt like it. But I stressed that his major work was in school. That was equivalent in terms of responsibility to the jobs his father and I had.

WRITER: His response?

TRUDI: He agreed.

WRITER: Did it work?

TRUDI: I thought it did for a few days. He seemed to be taking his homework seriously. But then he came home with a C on a social studies test and a C on a geometry test.

WRITER: You feel he can do better?

TRUDI: His I.Q. is between the superior and very superior level. C work makes him an underachiever. Right?

WRITER: Yes, if he's consistently below his ability level and there isn't some other explanation for it, then he's an underachiever.

TRUDI: I heard your definition. He's an underachiever.

WRITER: What else did you do?

TRUDI: Talked to him some more.

WRITER: Lectured?

TRUDI: I suppose so. No results.

WRITER: Then?

TRUDI: I laid down the law. I let him know I had the full support of his father. He was . . .

WRITER: Where was his father during these "lectures"?

TRUDI: He's been very busy, but we've discussed Brad's situation often.

WRITER: Brad is fifteen?

TRUDI: Yes.

WRITER: Now halfway through tenth grade.

TRUDI: I see what you're hinting. Brad's been falling down on his school work for about a year and a half, but his father is still only in the background.

WRITER: Just noting the point. It may mean little.

TRUDI: Well, anyhow, I formed a set of rules just as the "experts" recommended. I have a list right here. From a specific date and thereafter Brad was to do his homework at a set time each evening or before. If he wanted to watch a special program on TV, he had to start his homework earlier and complete it before the program.

If he wanted to, he could do his assignment right after school. Notice, I took flexibility into account. He has a designated place to work and that's where he must keep his school things. He can't have any distractions while he's working, such as a radio or stereo playing. We also had a set time for him to work on the weekends.

WRITER: I assume it didn't work very well?

TRUDI: No. I didn't see any improvement. He would act as if he had finished everything. He was, he said, thoroughly prepared for the next day.

WRITER: Which was not reflected in his grades. What else did you try?

TRUDI: I offered to discuss his school work with him frequently, but he almost always said that everything was fine. I started to visit the school whenever there was an opportunity, but high school is different from elementary. It wasn't the same.

WRITER: I would hope so.

TRUDI: I was told to show a lot of interest in his work and so I did, but I don't remember all that stuff Brad is studying. Even if I did, it wouldn't matter. Brad didn't want to discuss it with me.

WRITER: What was your next step?

TRUDI: A tutor.

WRITER: Did that help?

TRUDI: Brad seemed to do better for a while, but his grades began to fall again. Besides, he needed more than one tutor. It was just too expensive.

WRITER: Then?

TRUDI: A psychotherapist. He told us that there was a deep-seated emotional involvement that arrested Brad's efforts. Some underachievers, he said, use their inadequate performance as a way of maintaining a relationship with their parents.

These particular adolescents feel that if they do well, their parents will lose interest and ignore them. By doing less than they're able to, they maintain the parental connection they desire. Their behavior becomes a habit that provides some subconscious satisfaction.

Is this so?

WRITER: There is probably an element of validity to it in some kids. You may also add that, in a few cases, underachievement and other unsatisfactory behavior is a way of getting at parents for something the kids don't like. In either case, to arrive at this type of cause may require Freudian analysis.

My position is that, for the vast majority of underachievers, the reasons are elsewhere and hardly so esoteric. School, for many of them, is boring. The environment offers more interesting activities outside of school.

Some others are having the problems of adolescence, but these problems extend beyond physiological and even social changes. They include mental and emotional development and a confusion that impinges on the social aspects of their lives as well as their studies.

TRUDI: That sounds like an answer from a book.

WRITER: It is. Mine. What else did you do?

TRUDI: Following advice, I started an incentive program. I cut off Brad's allowance but permitted him to be rewarded financially for good marks on his tests and gave him bonuses for good report card grades. He wanted to argue about it but I wouldn't

listen. That's the way it had to be, I explained. If he wanted money, he had to do better in school.

But, you know, he seemed to be so unhappy and still wasn't doing better. When a friend of mine said that I was only bribing him to work, I dropped the effort. Why are you laughing?

WRITER: It could be considered a bribe, but so is a paycheck. I consider a bribe a way of getting a person to do something illegal or immoral. That hardly applies to schoolwork. A reward system has merit, but your error was not your plan but refusing to listen to your son's arguments.

TRUDI: He was claiming it was unfair.

WRITER: Maybe it was. What did you try next?

TRUDI: Punishment.

WRITER: In limited doses that works sometimes, but it hardly gets to the root of the problem. It loses its effectiveness if imposed too long. Anything else?

TRUDI: Sleepless nights.

WRITER: Yours, I suppose. How did that affect Brad?

TRUDI: I can't really say.

WRITER: I can. Now let me use some classic psychiatry. You wanted him to feel sorry for you. You might have saddled him with some guilt, but I doubt if that would have encouraged him to work harder in school.

You might go back to that psychotherapist again. This time for yourself.

TRUDI: That's what kids can do to parents. Now, what can *you* offer?

## Observation

Despite, or maybe because of, my training as a curriculum specialist, educational therapist, and researcher, I have become an

eclectic pragmatist. Although I lean heavily toward cognitive theory, I feel free to depart from any psychological notions of learning and behavior and to utilize and recommend whatever methodology brings favorable results. Some educators will find my approach worthy of study and expansion, but a few, I expect, will consider my unconventional approaches controversial. Ask them, if the occasion arises, *why* your child is an underachiever and what *they* are going to do about it.

The balance of this work answers the final question posed by Trudi Richards.

## **A Technicality**

I use “he” and “she” interchangeably throughout the text while I wait for the linguists to find a suitable substitute for the awkward “he/she” or “his/her” constructions, which disrupt the flow of the text.

## **Acknowledgments**

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