

Underachieving Teens

Most parents find it difficult to tolerate a teen whom they feel isn't trying. His or her refusal to do homework is often an indirect way of expressing anger and confusion. Under-achievement in kids can be caused by many things:

- Emotional upset. The teen who has experienced a death in the family or whose parents are going through a [divorce](#) is very likely to go through a period of underachievement.
- Mild [learning disabilities](#) or an unrecognized physical problem such as a vision or hearing difficulty.
- Overly high parental expectations. Dad may be a neurosurgeon, but Johnny may want to play in a rock band right now, and if the academic pressure is too strong, Johnny may rebel.
- Peer pressure, especially among teens: “If I do too well, my friends won't like me.”

Before trying any “remedies,” get a second opinion. If your teen's teachers feel he's doing pretty well (and if they have the test scores to prove it), it's worth listening.

Next, you might consider whether your underachiever has hit a downward spiral because she's disorganized or just doesn't know how to cope with a busy schedule with several subjects to work on every night. (Refer to [Homework Tips for Teens](#) on helping your teen get organized.)

Tuning In

Though it may be hard for parents to accept, not all children are academically inclined. But even if your teen isn't a scholar, he can be great at many other things. He may be a wonderful jazz pianist, or have excellent painting skills. Or maybe he's just a really nice kid. Your job as a parent is helping your teen find what he's good at, and what he really loves—whether it's helping the poor, working with tools, or [starting a business](#). Many things are possible for people of all abilities, and if you believe in your teen—no matter what— you make his road that much easier.

Sometimes, one of the best ways to help an underachiever is to not get directly involved in homework. Find out how much time he should be spending on homework every night and then require that that amount of time be invested. Make sure he touches base with you, your spouse, or an older sibling to show that he made an effort to do his work. Then check to see that the work makes it into the backpack. (Doing the work but not taking it to school is another form of self-sabotage for the underachiever.)

After the elapsed time, encourage your teen to do something he likes—whether it's painting or biking or tinkering under the hood of his car. Having him do something in which he excels will help bolster the confidence he needs to try school challenges.

Offering emotional support (underachievers generally have [low self-esteem](#)) helps immensely, but ultimately, the under-achiever has to decide to do it for himself. Show acceptance and affection for your child and make certain that he knows you love him no matter what his academic standing.

Progress may be exceedingly slow, but express pleasure in anything. An improvement from a C to a C+ is a good start. A few forays into grades of B- and above will prove to the under-achiever that he is capable of better work and nothing terrible will happen if he does it.

If you feel you're making no progress, consult a professional. (See [Getting Help for a Troubled Teen](#) for information on finding counseling help.) Underachievement often has deep psychological roots, and if you're not making headway with your teen, you'd be wise to contact someone who can help discover what's bothering him.

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