

## Underachievement: The Myths

### **1. Myth- Underachievers Respond Best to Rewards and/or Punishments**

***Frustrated teachers and parents alike often choose the wrong strategy to motivate underachieving students: they either promise rewards or impose punishments.***

#### Rewards

Research has shown that students who consistently respond only to rewards have been trained to look to others for approval and validation—the simple carrot-and-the-stick model. Reward systems can actually decrease motivation in the long run if students become overly reliant on rewards, thus inhibiting them from developing the ability to monitor or evaluate their own performance over time.

Not all rewards should be considered worthless, however. Research shows that verbal rewards had positive effects on motivation if they were delivered in an informational rather than controlling manner and that tangible rewards could motivate if they were given occasionally and unexpectedly. They had negative effects when they were given merely for participation, without regard for the quality of performance.

Rewards are most effective for increasing effort rather than for improving the quality of performance.

**Students who are driven to do well for the sole purpose of gaining some type of reward tend to meet the minimum standards required rather than striving for superior performance**

#### Punishment

Punishment, on the other hand, is effective only as long as the threat of punishment exists. In other words, children will act appropriately as long as they are being watched. When the threat leaves the room or the substitute teacher arrives, the student will revert to his original behavior.

This can be likened to an adult who speeds when no police officer is in sight. Another reason punishment is not an effective motivator is because children tend to associate the punishment with the punisher. A student is more likely to blame their teacher for punishing them rather than taking responsibility for the action that instigated the punishment. In the long-term, punishment does little to motivate students to do better.

### **2. Myth—Underachievers Are lazy**

Many students who are underachieving are actually experiencing **learned helplessness**. We have all experienced learned helplessness in one area or another and, as adults, we accept it in each other. Learned helplessness comes into play when we encounter a situation in which we have been unsuccessful in the past.

There are students who struggle in a particular subject and, as a result, withdraw during a lesson or demonstrate a reluctance to learn anything new because past experiences have revealed that they cannot be successful in this particular discipline. Such students assume that failure is inevitable and unavoidable. Some students avoid failure by lapsing into forms of cheating or avoidance (bunking lessons, not completing h/w)

Persistent avoidance pushes the child further and further behind academically.

Research has shown that Underachievers are, in fact, highly motivated—in directions other than getting good grades

**Parents and Teachers can best address learned helplessness by**

1. Change the student's thought process so he or she no longer believes that failure is inevitable. This means considering both the actual failures and the child's perception of the reasons for his or her failure. Such students need to **relearn** that they are in charge of their progress.
2. Create a learning environment where mistakes are viewed as **inevitable and useful!** Measureable successes need to be an integral part of the learning.
3. Teachers and parents should not put a ceiling on performance. Telling a student that 'this is the best you can achieve' will only de-motivate those underachievers. (Target stickers)
4. Expect the same amount of effort from each student, not the same performance. Do not compromise your expectations because of students' attitudes, cultures, or socioeconomic backgrounds.

*"Students are not motivated to learn in the face of failure." (Boekaerts)*