HELPING YOUR UNDERACHIEVER
BECOME A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT

The Unmotivated Child

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To my husband, James——my own secure base

. . . a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unlaid ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken.

SIGMUND FREUD, 1909

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Introduction:

The Mystery of Underachievement

John and his parents are sitting at the dining room table. His father looks angry, his mother looks worried, and John looks discouraged. His father holds John's report card in his hand.

"Son, how can anybody with your intelligence make four Ds *and two* Fs*?" his father asks. "Your teachers say you're not turning in most of your homework. And you didn't hand in a project in science or social studies."*

Wringing her hands, his mother exclaims, "John, why don't you do your work? You know you can do it! And you know we'll help you if you need it." John slumps down in his chair and looks forlornly at the floor.

"John, answer your mother when she's talking to you!" his father snaps. "Why aren't you doing your schoolwork?"

"I don't know," John mumbles.

His father shakes his head disgustedly. "Son, you've got to work harder. From now on, when you get home from school, I want you to go up to your room and I don't want you to come down until that homework is done."

"OK, Dad. I'll try harder," promises John.

This scene is played out in thousands of households across the country between parents and underachieving children. The parents feel frustrated because they don't understand why their bright child isn't doing

his work. They feel anxious about his educational and career prospects, and they feel angry that he doesn't work harder in school. They are even more frustrated because he can't seem to come up with an explanation of *why* he isn't doing his work.

For his part, the child feels discouraged about his poor grades and his inability to solve his problems. He knows he has disappointed his parents, and he is deeply disappointed in himself. But he is telling the truth when he says that he doesn't know why he doesn't do his work. And although his parents have accurately pointed out what he needs to do (work harder), and he genuinely wants to do better to please his parents and to feel better about himself, he will almost certainly fail to keep his promise to improve.

For some unfortunate children, underachievement seems almost inevitable, or at least understandable. Children living in impoverished environments grow up in an atmosphere permeated with hopelessness and helplessness. It is not surprising that many of these children, trapped within the vicious cycle of poverty and despair, have trouble succeeding in school. But many underachievers do not come from families beset by cultural and economic deprivation. Like John, they come from families that are able to provide the resources that support academic achievement. They are bright, even gifted youngsters who don't do their work or who consistently perform at a level below their ability. Their underachievement is a mystery—to their parents, their teachers, and themselves.

If parents focus their attention only on the child's current school situation, they will not be able to understand why he isn't performing better. There is no good reason why John, with all his ability, can't do his work—or rather, there is no good *rational* reason. But the key to the mystery of underachievement does not lie in rational processes or even in conscious processes. The key lies beneath the surface behavior—that is, the child's failure to perform—in the internal set of beliefs that guide his attitudes and actions.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON AN OLD PROBLEM

The view of underachievement presented here is based on attachment theory, which is an outgrowth of the psychoanalytic theory developed by Sigmund Freud. It also draws on research in developmental psychology, learning and motivation theory, and my own years of working with underachievers and their families. Attachment theorists, such as John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, propose that all human beings are motivated to form close emotional bonds, or *attachments*, with other human beings throughout their lives, and that our capacity to form attachments has a great deal to do with our ability to function effectively in the world. People who have secure, loving attachments are able to accept and give help to others, develop satisfying relationships, and pursue their goals with confidence and enthusiasm. In contrast, those who have difficulty forming secure attachments develop a distrust of their own worth and competence and the willingness of others to help them meet their needs. Such insecurely attached individuals are plagued with chronic feelings of emptiness, dissatisfaction, and anxiety. They are unable either to reach their maximum potential or to develop and maintain fulfilling relationships with others.

According to attachment theory, the ability to form attachments is primarily based on the nature of the interactions children have with their parents and other caretakers during infancy and childhood. For children to develop secure attachments, they must be able to satisfy two basic needs. First, they must feel safe and cared for, and second, they must feel supported and validated in their efforts to explore their world. When children are fortunate enough to have reasonably warm, consistent, and supportive parenting, they have what we call a *secure base*—a sanctuary where they can meet their dual needs for nurturance and validation. Such children internalize an image of themselves as lovable and competent and an image of others as responsive and helpful. As a result, they have a secure base not only in the external environment in the form of their parents but also within themselves to comfort and encourage them wherever they go. Attachment theorists refer to these mental representations of the self and others as *working models*, indicating that the person's internal images are continually undergoing modi-

fications and adjustments, especially in the early stages of their formation.

But for some children, finding a secure base is not so easy. Many parents today were unable to obtain the kind of security and validation they needed as children from their own families. When they come to parenthood, their lack of a secure base during their own development, lack of support from others in their present lives, or both make it hard for them to provide their children with the kind of consistent encouragement that builds positive working models of the self and others. Other youngsters have such overwhelming developmental problems that they tax the physical and emotional resources of even the most supportive parents. In either case, such children internalize an image of themselves as somehow unlovable and incompetent and an image of others as unavailable and unhelpful. They have trouble feeling secure either in the outside world or within themselves.

When the child comes to school, she brings with her these internal views of herself and others, and they guide her interactions with teachers and peers. In fact, she tends to behave in ways that induce those around her to behave as her internal world tells her to expect. The child with a secure base is cheerful, eager to learn, and easily soothed when frustrated. As a result, she receives positive responses from teachers and peers that build feelings of self-esteem and motivate her to persist with challenging tasks. But the child whose base is not so secure expects that others will be unhelpful, critical, and rejecting. Unconsciously she sets up situations in which she evokes those responses from others. And with every negative response, her internal belief that she is unlovable and incompetent is reinforced. So begins the vicious cycle of underachievement, as the child's maladaptive beliefs lead to ineffective behaviors, followed by negative reactions from parents, teachers, and peers that reinforce her distorted internal perspective and further erode positive feelings about the self and its capacity to master developmental tasks.

I want to emphasize here that it is not the intent of this book to blame parents. Years of working with parents have taught me that all parents do the very best they can with their children, given their ability to obtain support and encouragement for parenting. Moreover, the as-

signing of blame that occurs so often with the underachiever is counterproductive, because it prevents the underachiever and the people trying to help her from relying on each other for support. Rather, this book is intended to alert parents to the need to identify and alter ineffective interactional patterns that inhibit their child's academic progress. No parents wish their child to be an underachiever, any more than any child wishes to be a school failure. Unfortunately, however, ineffective interactional patterns tend to be passed down from one generation to the next, so that the best-intentioned parents often perpetuate the same inappropriate ways of relating to and communicating with their children that their parents used with them.

At the same time, however, this approach also stresses that parents are the most powerful change agents in the process of treating the underachiever. By modifying the way in which they interact with him, they can help him modify the inappropriate internal beliefs that give rise to underachievement. Throughout the treatment process, the focus is on communication. Parents are helped to understand the messages the underachiever is trying to convey through his bewildering and frustrating behaviors and to communicate more constructively with him. Because a person's view of himself and others is shaped to a great extent by the way in which others talk to him and talk about him in the presence of others, this approach stresses identifying and practicing ways of communicating that enhance the underachiever's feelings of self-worth and encourage his investment in his educational experiences. Parents are also helped to communicate more effectively with the other significant adults in the child's learning environment—his teachers—so that they, too, can more effectively support his efforts to achieve.

This book is organized in three parts. Part One describes the pathways to underachievement. Chapter 1, "The Road to Underachievement," describes the warning signs of underachievement in elementary, middle, and high school and traces the insidious progression of the undetected and untreated syndrome. Chapter 2, "Identifying the Underachiever," helps parents learn to distinguish underachievement from other problems, such as the boredom of the gifted student, learning disabilities, and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and learn how to collab-

orate with teachers to obtain an accurate assessment of the child's academic and social problems. In Part Two, parents are taken on a journey into the underachiever's mysterious world. Chapter 3 describes the underachiever's internal world, with the irrational beliefs underlying his baffling behaviors that sabotage his ability to succeed and drive parents and teachers to distraction. In Chapter 4, the profoundly negative effects of that internal world on the underachiever's school experiences are revealed, including not only his classroom performance but also his relationships with teachers and classmates. Four styles of underachiever behavior are described, all of which derive from the maladaptive internal perspective described earlier.

Part Three is devoted to the practical program of treating the underachiever. Chapter 5, "The Problem with the Solution: Why Treatments Fail," describes common interventions for underachievement and helps parents understand why they don't and can't work, thus saving precious time in the treatment process. Chapter 6, which forms the heart of the treatment program, opens the door to change by helping parents communicate constructively rather than destructively with the underachiever. Parents first learn how to translate the underachiever's frustrating and incomprehensible way of expressing himself and then learn five constructive communication strategies that help the underachiever modify his ineffective views of himself and others so that he can approach his school tasks with confidence and enthusiasm. Chapter 7, "The Homework Trap and How to Get Out of It," offers seven practical strategies on all aspects of helping the underachiever manage his homework effectively, ranging from how to get him started on his homework to how to help him get it back to school. Although parents may think that there is little they can do to influence their child's behavior in the classroom, this is certainly not the case! Chapter 8, "Teaming with Teachers," describes eight practical techniques that encourage teachers' assistance and commitment to the treatment process and help the underachiever develop more effective behaviors in the classroom. Because the underachiever very often presents behavior problems as well as academic problems, Chapter 9 provides parents with insight into the message hidden behind the underachiever's misbehavior and offers strategies for helping him manage his negative feel-

ings more productively. Finally, Chapter 10, "The Transformation Process," describes how change occurs and provides guidelines for supporting the underachiever, his teachers, and other family members through the change process and dealing constructively with the inevitable setbacks on the road to recovery. Trying to understand and help the underachiever can be frustrating, but it can also be a deeply rewarding experience for parents as they learn and change together with their child.

Part One

Pathways to Underachievement

1.

The Road to Underachievement

Danny is an attractive seven-year-old second grader who lives with his parents and four-year-old sister in a middle-class neighborhood with excellent schools. Although he seems bright and has a good vocabulary, he completes very little written work in school. Instead, he spends his time playing with toys he has smuggled into class, fidgeting restlessly in his chair, or just gazing into space. Danny's teacher tells his parents that she has tried everything to get him to do his work. His frantic parents are beside themselves with worry. They remind each other of how much Danny enjoyed preschool and kindergarten. His first-grade teacher did say he was "immature," but she assured them he'd grow out of it. They can't understand what has gone wrong or what to do about it.

Sam is a stocky thirteen-year-old seventh-grade youngster with an IQ of 135. Despite his ability, he has done poorly in school since fourth grade. Retained in sixth grade because he failed to turn in most of his homework, Sam is in danger of failing again. Since entering middle school, he has become the class clown, constantly trying to amuse his classmates and avoiding his academic work. After his last report card (three Cs, two Ds, and an F), his parents grounded him for two weeks and ordered him to write down his assignments in a notebook and have his teachers sign it every day. After three days, Sam forgot to ask his teachers to sign his notebook. After a week, he lost the notebook. Sam's

father is so angry that he is threatening to send him to a military boarding school 150 miles away.

A petite, pretty tenth-grade student, fourteen-year-old Annie is coasting through high school with Cs and Ds, despite excellent scores on ability and achievement tests. Although her grades were satisfactory in elementary and middle school, they dropped dramatically in ninth grade and have been marginal ever since. Annie's sister, Sarah, a high school senior, is an honor roll student and has been accepted at a top state university. After Annie graduates from high school, she wants to move to Los Angeles and "get into the music business." Currently, she is putting forth just enough effort to pass the subjects she dislikes or considers irrelevant, which is most of them. When her parents try to talk to her about the value of getting an education, Annie either tunes them out or storms angrily out of the room. Her parents are so distressed that they frequently argue about how to deal with their daughter. Both secretly wonder if their marriage will survive her high school years.

All three of these youngsters are underachievers. Underachievers can be found in every grade in school, from kindergarten to graduate school, in both sexes, across ethnic and socioeconomic groups, and in every occupation. What is underachievement? Underachievement is a discrepancy between ability and performance *that persists over time*. Underachievers do not wake up one morning and suddenly decide not to do their work. Nor do they wake up after years of performing poorly in school and suddenly decide to change—not without understanding and help. Underachievement can occur at any level of intellectual ability. Some underachievers are gifted, with superior intellectual ability and special talents. Others have mild to severe learning problems that are compounded by their lack of effort in the classroom. In a sense, we are all underachievers. Every individual, by virtue of being human and being born to less-than-perfect parents in a less-than-perfect world, is something of an underachiever.

Underachievement can reveal itself as early as preschool, or it may first surface at transitional points, such as second grade, fourth grade, seventh grade, the first year of high school, or even later. All too often,

however, the early warning signs of underachievement are overlooked or minimized by parents and teachers. The progression of underachievement is often so insidious that many children, especially those who are very bright, highly verbal, or both, are not identified until late in their school careers. Nevertheless, careful observation reveals the operation of the child's maladaptive views of the self and others, even in the early elementary grades.

THE UNDERACHIEVER IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Mrs. Finch is conducting a reading group in a corner of the room with six first graders while the other pupils work on the morning's independent assignments. Greg, a pudgy, freckle-faced youngster, twirls his pencil and wiggles restlessly in his chair. As he looks at his papers, an anxious expression comes over his face. He begins drumming on his desk with his pencil, first softly, then louder and louder until Mrs. Finch looks in his direction.

"Greg, stop making that noise!" she commands.

Looking abashed, Greg stops drumming, but he still does not begin working. After a few seconds, he picks up one of his papers, leaps out of his chair, startling the children seated near him by the sudden movement, and walks back to Mrs. Finch.

"Greg, why are you here?" asks Mrs. Finch in an impatient tone.

"I don't know how to do this," he mumbles, waving the paper in her direction.

"Where were you when I was giving directions?" demands the teacher. "You know there are to be no interruptions while I'm having a reading group!"

Rebuffed, Greg trudges slowly back to his seat. Even now, however, he does not begin to work. After a moment, he reaches into his desk, pulls out two small action figures, and begins to enact a battle with them. The fighting becomes fast and furious, but because it is conducted in silence, the teacher does not notice. Greg's papers lie untouched on his desk.

Here, even in first grade, the operation of the budding underachiever's distorted internal perspective—and its devastating effects on his classroom performance—are already apparent. Because he believes that he is incompetent, he feels incapable of performing tasks on his own. But because he also believes that others will be unavailable or unhelpful if he seeks assistance, he unconsciously behaves in such a way that he induces those very reactions. Unaware of the maladaptive beliefs underlying his irritating behavior, his teacher responds in the rejecting manner he anticipates, further confirming his negative views of himself and others.

As the deleterious effects of the child's internal world become more and more apparent in the classroom, parents may attempt to reassure each other and themselves by downplaying or normalizing his inappropriate behavior, especially when the underachiever is a boy.

> *Renardo, who had been a happy-go-lucky youngster in the warm, playful atmosphere of his kindergarten class, was overwhelmed by the academic requirements of first grade, a demanding teacher, and the loss of his status as the smartest youngster in his class. By October, he was acting out his anger and frustration by distracting himself and others when the teacher gave instructions, failing to complete his work, and even provoking fights with other students.*
>
> *"I know Renardo isn't paying attention and is acting up a little in class, but are those really such serious problems at his age?" inquired Mrs. Johnson, a hopeful tone in her voice. "I've been talking with my friends who have children, and they say you just have to expect boys to get into trouble in school."*

Inattention, lack of productivity, and aggressive behavior are most definitely *not* normal. They represent the child's unconscious attempt to communicate to his parents and teachers that he is feeling overwhelmed by his school experiences—and that he desperately needs their help. Although the underachiever is often able to maintain adequate grades during elementary school because of his intellectual gifts, the signs of the latent underachievement syndrome become increasingly observable over time: