

Creative Underachievers: Children Who are too Out of the Box

By Sylvia Rimm

Educators in the field of gifted education attempt to not only accelerate curriculum for their students, but also to encourage and expand their critical and creative thinking. They often explain this creative approach to students as *out-of-the-box* thinking. *The box* is an effective analogy to help children

understand how to shift their thinking and learning styles toward taking initiative and becoming more original, questioning, and imaginative.

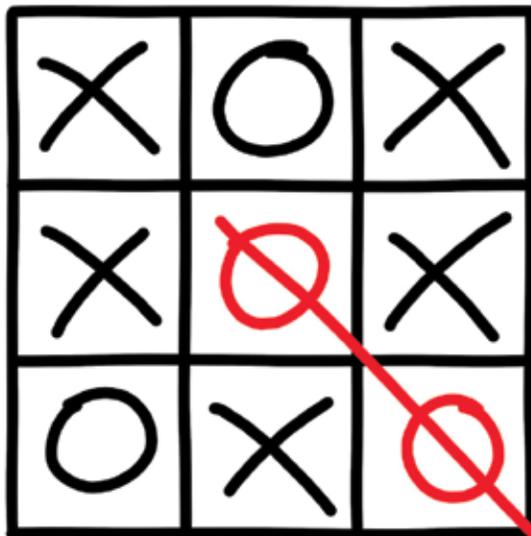
As a psychologist who specializes in gifted children, I sometimes work with students who do indeed enjoy learning and working *out of the box*, but struggle with *in-the-box* assignments, even when they are at appropriate challenge levels. They say things like, “I would enjoy math if 6 plus 4 could equal something different each time, but we always have to put down the same exact answer. It’s boring.” These children often have uneven abilities,¹ so that while they may enjoy talking, they prefer to write little, and specifically find repetitive study unpleasant, even when it is helpful for their mastery of information. Many children underachieve in school.²

Underachieving children are not always creative, and creative children are not always underachievers. However, an alarming number of highly creative children do not achieve to their abilities in school. Parents of those highly creative children frequently conclude with a certain amount of pride that “their children have always seemed to march to the beat of different drummers.”³

What Parents and Teachers Can Do to Help Creative Underachievers

Ideal home and school environments that foster both creativity and achievement include parents and teachers who value creativity within the limits of reasonable conformity. Children are praised and encouraged to work hard, but also for their unusual and critical thinking and production. The creative thinking does not become a device or a manipulation for avoidance of academic or home responsibilities, even when they are not as exciting. If, in any way, creativity takes on a ritualized position of regularly avoiding parents’ requirements or the school’s expectations, creativity becomes used as “an easy way out” for avoidance of responsibility and achievement. Here are some recommendations for parents and teachers for the prevention and reversal of underachievement in creative children:⁴

- As a parent, don’t, if at all possible, ally with children against a parent or teacher



in the name of creativity. Parents should communicate their concerns to the other parent or the teacher, but it must be done respectfully so the children are not overempowered to avoid home or school expectations.

- **Encourage creative children to be productively engaged in at least one area of creative expression, and help them to find audiences for their performances.**⁵ Children that are happily and productively involved in creative areas are less likely to use their energy to fight authority. Whether their choice of creative expression is art, drama, music, or science, a creative outlet frees them of some of their internalized pressures to be nonconformists in other areas.
- **Be sure not to permit children to use their creative outlet as a means of evading academic assignments.** Demanding music practice or impending art show deadlines are reasons for flexibility in academic requirements but not excuses for avoidance of responsibility.
- **Don't label one child in the family "the creative child."** It causes that child to feel pressured to be most creative and causes other siblings to believe that creativity is not possible for them at all.
- **Find appropriate models and mentors in areas of children's creativity.**⁶ Creative children, particularly in adolescence, too easily discover inappropriate models that may also be creative underachievers. Appropriate models should share their creative talent area, but must also give messages of responsibility, self-discipline, hard work, and reasonable conformity. Mentors should be achieving, creative people that work both "in and out of the box."
- **Find a peer environment that combines creativity and achievement.** Creative children need to feel comfortably accepted by other achieving and creative young people. Gifted resource programs frequently provide a haven for creative underachievers. Many summer opportunities provide excellent creative outlets.
- **Encourage intrinsic motivation while**

*also teaching competition.*⁷ Children should learn to enjoy the creative process for the joy and satisfaction of their personal involvement. However, they should not be permitted to entirely avoid the competitive arena. They should experience a balance of winning and losing to build confidence and resilience.

- **Use creative strengths to build up weaknesses.** Children don't have to be equally strong in all areas, but they do have to accomplish, at least minimally, in school-required subjects so that they don't close educational doors for themselves. Artists who don't like math or creative writers who don't like memory work can use their creative strengths as a means of adjusting to their weaknesses. Artistic or unique folders, assignment notebooks, or technology may help the non-mathematician remember to do assignments, particularly if the artist is encouraged to share these artistic creations with peers. Creative children can often find their own solutions to dealing with their weaknesses, and some flexibility and encouragement on the part of teachers will foster creative solutions for creative children.
- **Avoid confrontations, particularly if you can't control the outcomes.** This is not an excuse to avoid firmness and reasonable consequences, but it is a warning to prevent overreaction, overpunishments, and the continuous struggles and battles that often plague creative adolescents' environments. Modeling and sharing positive work and play experiences can keep parents, teachers, and children in an alliance.
- **Help creative adolescents to plan a creative future.** Though they are underachievers at this time, it's most critical that they understand that most creative careers are open only to achievers. If they're unwilling to compromise and conform to reasonable requirements, they're likely to close doors to future creative opportunities. There is a precarious balance between creativity and oppositionality. Creative

children often feel so internally pressured to be creative that they define their personal creativity only as nonconformity. If they're unwilling to conform at least minimally, they risk losing the opportunities to develop their unique talents. If parents and teachers don't encourage avoidance of responsibility in the name of creativity, creative children can channel their important talent toward productive contributions, feel better about themselves, and share their creative contributions with society. ☺

Author's Note

Sylvia Rimm, Ph.D., is a psychologist who directs the Family Achievement Clinic in Ohio and specializes in working with gifted children. She is also a clinical professor at Case School of Medicine. Dr. Rimm speaks and publishes internationally on parenting, giftedness, creativity, and underachievement. Among her many books are *Education of the Gifted and Talented*, *How to Parent So Children Will Learn*, *Keys to Parenting the Gifted Child*, and *Jane Wins Again*. Dr. Rimm was a longtime contributor to *The Today Show*, hosted *Family Talk* on public radio nationally, and served on the Board of Directors of the National Association for Gifted Children. She has received many awards for her lifetime contributions to gifted children.

Endnotes

¹Rimm, S. B. (2008a). Learning disabilities. *Sylvia Rimm on Raising Kids*, 18(4).

²Rimm, S. B. (2008b). *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades and What You Can Do About It*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

³Rimm, S. B. (2003). Marching to the beat of a different drummer. *Sylvia Rimm on Raising Kids*, 14(2).

⁴Rimm, 2008b.

⁵Rimm, S. B. (1996). The arts are important for your children. *How to Stop Underachievement*, 6(4), 1-5.

⁶Rimm, 2008b.

⁷Rimm, S. B. (2005). Teaching healthy competition. *Sylvia Rimm on Raising Kids*, 16(3).