

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 (2008), 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.

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." Here's a case example [pseudonym used]:

Jack's parents brought him to me in first grade after his teacher referred him for Special Education. She could not motivate him to even attempt his

reading workbook assignments, although she recognized that he was an excellent reader. He repeatedly explained that "workbooks were too boring" for him and refused to do them. He had also explained his boredom problem to his father, who had told him he should do his work but also added that, "School hadn't been creative enough for him, either." Unfortunately, Jack heard his father's message as support for his wish not to do "boring" workbooks and continued to defy his teacher.

Jack's IQ score was 138 and his GIFT (Group Inventory for Finding Creative Talent) (Rimm, 1976) creativity score was 99th percentile. Reading and math scores were also 99th percentile. Jack loved reading, talking, and computers, but did not like writing and hated repetitious work.

A combination of parent support for teacher direction, explanations to Jack of the rationale of importance for the work, curriculum changes that provided more challenge, and teacher rewards for accomplishment of the more arduous and boring tasks of writing quickly reversed Jack's primary grade underachievement.

Jack continued to see me in therapy occasionally throughout his school years. His creative needs were always crucial to him, but he also learned to work "within-the-box" when required. He became an excellent student and adjusted well socially.

In college, Jack first majored in physics and then changed his major to computer science, but adventure and creativity were always important in identifying his career goals. He completed a nature-video photography Master's degree program specifically based on his science undergraduate major.

Today, Jack is an Emmy Award winning nature photographer who works both in and out-of-the-box to make video productions available on the Discovery Channel, National Geographic, and other media formats. He continues to "march to the beat of a different drummer," earns a good living, and makes a positive contribution to society.

Both creative achievers and underachievers have been given early messages about the importance of creativity by at least one parent. The messages come most simply from the praise given to them for their creative ideas, talk, actions and/or products. They learn that when they do something unusual or if they have a funny or different idea, it brings them positive attention. Creative thinking becomes a personal motivational goal, which won't necessarily lead to underachievement if home and school environments cooperate to foster the creative process. They identify themselves as creative people, and they feel creativity as a crucial part of their persona.

An early indicator of a potential problem will appear in the differential valuing of the child's creativity or escape behavior by two parents. If one parent defends the child's behaviors as creative, and the other parent views the creativity as opposition or avoidance of responsibility, the seeds of underachievement can be planted.

Early Telltale Signs

At the elementary school level, these creative children may be seen as achievers, although the telltale signs of creative opposition are sometimes already visible as they were with Jack. They often voice complaints about boring math facts or workbooks, teachers who don't like them or arguments they win with teachers! Sometimes, caring parents ally with them against a teacher, ask for less busywork, or request unnecessary extensions or

assignments. Parent conversations with other adults that take place within children's hearing (referential speaking) about the lack of creativity in schools, the inadequacy of teachers, or the invidious comparison of routine schoolwork with the more creative, out-of-school activities in sports, drama, or music add to the opposition problem. One parent typically blames the school, teacher, or other parent for the child's occasional (at first) irresponsibility.

As a parent allies with the child against the school, the child learns to avoid school responsibility and to blame the boring school curriculum or teacher for his or her problems. In the alliance of child and parent, the child gains too much power and becomes engaged in a subtle struggle with one or another teacher in the name of creativity. There are good years and bad years at first. Within this struggle are the seeds of the pattern of determined and oppositional nonconformity. The child has begun the march to the beat of an ever different drummer.

Pressures Creative Adolescents Face

Creative young people are faced with paradoxical pressures. Their now internalized value system says to "be creative." They translate that to mean "don't conform." Achievement in school requires considerable conformity. Peers also demand conformity for acceptance. Conforming to teachers or friends seems antithetical to these children's wishes to be creative or different. During the early adolescent years, creative underachievers can become quite unhappy and often feel unappreciated by parents, teachers, and peers alike.

By high school, opposition is firmly entrenched and has become a way of life. While the parents refer to the problem as adolescent rebellion, the teen considers him or herself as only independent and different. The opposition

that began as an alliance between parents or one parent against a teacher, has expanded to become opposition against one or both parents and any number of teachers. Sometimes, the adolescent will be successful in getting Mom on his/her side against Dad or vice versa. Either or both parents may share in their protest against the school. The most likely alliance group of all, however, will be an oppositional peer group, preferably one that identifies itself as "different." The creative underachiever can finally find acceptance by friends who value, most of all, nonconformity and opposition. Even within that peer group, *Creative Chris* both struggles with and revels in being "the most different." Grades are often poor, assignments are missing, and disorganization plagues the creative underachiever. Mood swings are common, as they feel intense successes and failures. Some search out drugs, which enhance their excitement about feeling different.

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:

- ***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.*** 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.*** 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.** 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

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