

Ask Dr. Sylvia Rimm

Q: I have a 10-year-old boy who is in a gifted program. He only goes one day a week to this class, and the rest of the time is spent in his regular fourth-grade class. He has no motivation to do anything. He skims by, keeping his grades at a B or sometimes an A, but he could do so much better. He challenges his teacher's way of teaching and doesn't pay attention in class. When he gets home he picks fights with his younger sister or his father and me, and we have to nag him to do his homework, chores etc... I'm at my breaking point with his negative attitude. He strives at things until he knows them and then gives up and doesn't want to listen to suggestions to do better. We've taken him to counseling and started him on a rewards program, but there aren't any huge changes. Every day I cry over what he might become because of his lack of enthusiasm. Please help!

A: Your concern sounds all too familiar to me. Without knowing the details I couldn't tell you the exact problem. It may be that he isn't sufficiently challenged in school. You would know that if he shows motivation in the gifted program but not in the regular classroom. It's also possible that he became accustomed to too much praise and attention as a very young child. Sometimes that happens with children who speak early, learn to read on their own, or show other unusual talents. People praise them so much that they depend on praise and when they have to share attention in the classroom they feel attention deprived. They act up to get attention or avoid work that doesn't feel easy to them.

A most typical problem is that gifted children can be too competitive. In the early grades they're best at everything and learn so easily. When the curriculum becomes more difficult, they feel ashamed to work hard, almost as if working hard instead of learning easily would show they weren't smart enough. We tell children in our Family Achievement Clinic, "The harder you work, the smarter you get," but children often assume that if you're smart, all work should come to you quickly and easily.

It always helps children to love learning if they find material very interesting, but there is much they must learn that isn't particularly exciting but is fundamental. Sometimes rewards are helpful, but it takes time before they're effective. Emphasizing that effort counts, and praising your son for perseverance when he shows it, instead of reminding him of how smart he is, may improve motivation gradually; and it can prevent feelings of pressure.

My book *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades* (Great Potential Press, 2008) has just been revised and updated in a third edition. I think you would find it very helpful for understanding your son's problem.

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