



MARCHING TO THE BEAT OF A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

*The Delicate Balance Between
Creativity and Oppositionality*

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 child has *always* seemed to march to the beat of a different drummer."

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 products and actions. They learn that when they do something unusual, or if they have a funny or different idea, it brings 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.



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An early indicator of a potential problem will appear in the differential valuing of the child's creativity by two parents. The child that identifies with the creative parent is likely to be creative; but if the other parent doesn't value creativity, the seeds of opposition and underachievement may be planted.

At elementary level, creative children may be seen as achievers, although the telltale signs of creative opposition are usually already visible. They often voice complaints about boring reading workbooks and teachers that don't like them, and parents may ally with them against the teacher, or ask for less busywork or request deadline extensions for 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, will add to the opposition problem.

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As the parent sides with the child against the school, the child learns to avoid school responsibility and to blame the boring school curriculum for his/her



problems. In the powerful alliance of child and parent, the child gains too much power and becomes engaged in a subtle struggle with his/her teacher in the name of creativity. Within this struggle are the seeds of the pattern of determined and oppositional nonconformity. The child has begun his/her march to the beat of an *ever* different drummer.

Creative young people are faced with paradoxical pressures. Their internalized value system says to "be creative." They sometimes translate that to mean "don't ever conform." However, achievement requires some conformity. Peers demand conformity for acceptance, but they also pressure kids not to conform to parents and teachers. Conforming to friends seems antithetical to their wishes to be creative. Parents also expect some conformity to their rules, but don't want their children to conform to negative peers. The pressures to conform or not conform can feel confusing and lonely to young people. During the preadolescent years, creative underachievers are typically unhappy and may not be appreciated by parents, teachers, or peers.

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By senior high school, opposition can be firmly entrenched and become a way of life. The opposition that may have begun as an alliance between a parent and 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 has finally found acceptance by friends who value, most of all, nonconformity and opposition.

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 that value creativity within the limits of reasonable conformity. That is, children are praised and encouraged in unusual and critical thinking and production, but this difference does not become a device or a manipulation for avoidance of academic or home responsibility. If in any way creativity takes on a ritualized position of avoiding a parent's requirements or the school's expectations, then creativity will be used as "a way out" of achievement. Here are some recommendations for parents and teachers for the prevention and/or cure of underachievement in creative children:

◆ *Encourage creative children to be productive in at least one area of creative expression, and help them to find an audience for their performances.* Children that are happily and productively involved in creative arenas are less likely to be using 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 pressure to be nonconformists in other areas. Be sure, however, not to permit them to use that creative outlet as a means of evading academic assignments.



◆ *Don't label one child in the family "the creative child."* It causes that child to feel pressured to be most creative all the time and causes other siblings to believe that creativity is not possible for them at all.

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♦ *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 the message of self-discipline and reasonable conformity, which the underachievers have not developed. The model should be an achieving, creative person.



♦ *A parent should not, if at all possible, ally with a child against a teacher in the name of creativity.* Parents should communicate their concerns to teachers, but it must be done carefully so the teachers or school are not "put down" in the process and the child doesn't view this as an excuse for not fulfilling school expectations.

♦ *Find a peer environment that combines creativity and achievement so that creative children may feel comfortably accepted by other achieving and creative young people.* Gifted resource programs frequently provide a haven for creative underachievers, provided the identification process has not eliminated them from participation. There are many summer opportunities for drama, music, art, photography, computers, science, math, or foreign languages that provide excellent creative outlets.

There is a precarious balance between creativity and oppositionality.

♦ *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 in their area of creativity.



♦ *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. Creative children will often find their own solutions to dealing with their weaknesses, and some flexibility and encouragement on the part of teachers will foster creative solutions.

♦ *One parent shouldn't ally with a child against another parent in the name of creativity or permit the child's creative needs to be the excuse for not doing what the other parent requests.* This may cause the child to become rebellious with creativity as his/her excuse.

♦ *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, over-punishment, and the continuous struggles and battles that often plague the creative adolescent's environment. Modeling and sharing positive work and play experiences are more effective than lectures and threats.

♦ *Help creative adolescents to plan a creative future.* Though they are underachievers at this time, it's 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. Oppositionality is creativity gone too far. 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 facilitate avoidance of responsibility in the name of creativity, creative children can channel their important talent toward productive contributions and feel better about themselves.



Kids and Pets

Kids and pets are usually a wonderful combination. Pets can teach children sensitivity and responsibility. They also bring joy to many families. Parents often ask for my advice about pets, so here are some suggestions for discussion before a pet is added to your family.

How old do children have to be to care for pets? Children of all ages love pets, but they differ considerably in terms of which responsibilities they can handle. Preschool children may need supervision around pets and can only be helpers to adults in feeding or care. Pets are wonderful for teaching young children gentleness, but those lessons take patience and protection for both animals and children.

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Elementary-age children can take on some responsibility for feeding and grooming pets, but will probably require adult instruction and reminders. Teaching gentleness continues to be important for these children as well. Pets are a great responsibility lesson for children. We like children to learn to feed their pets before *they* eat because that helps to make the feeding a habit. Pets need loving attention and play as well, but that's usually less of a problem for children than remembering that their pets are hungry or thirsty.

Teens are capable of most pet responsibilities and sensitivities. Pets can be their wonderful companions and feel like part of the family by teen years. Even teens require adult supervision though because they may become so busy that they sometimes forget their pets. Taking the responsibility for teaching pets discipline is a great learning experience for self-discipline for teens as well, so signing up to take a dog through obedience class may generalize to some understanding of discipline strategies that parents use on them.

Which members of the family want the pet? Too often I discover that some family members want a pet and others don't. Furthermore, it may be that the family member who doesn't want a pet is saddled with many of the pet responsibilities. While it's reasonable for a family member who didn't want a pet to take on occasional responsibilities, that person shouldn't be expected to do too much, nor should the person become the family scapegoat when he/she objects to having a pet.



What are the rules and regulations? Before adding a pet to your family, consider the rules and regulations of your community. Most pets aren't allowed to roam freely and some apartment complexes have rules prohibiting pets. Don't add a pet to your family until you know you can live within the pet rules.

What about the neighbors? You won't have to consider your neighborhood for tropical fish or indoor kitties, but puppies can do a lot of barking and can interfere with neighborly relations. Consider the bark before you buy and clarify any concerns with your neighbors.

What are the costs? Animals require health care and inoculations by a veterinarian. They will also need paid attention if you plan to travel. These costs should be planned before you make your decision.



For most families, the advantages of having pets far outweigh the disadvantages, but careful consideration to the maturity of your children and the responsibilities involved makes relationships with pets more realistic and positive for families and eliminates the pitfalls of abused animals and angry families and neighbors.



Sylvia Says . . .

TODDLER BEING ROUGH WITH DOG

Dear Dr. Sylvia:

I have a two-year-old boy who won't stop being rough with our Dalmatian. He grabs her face, slaps, kicks, and even kneels on her when she is lying down. The dog growled and nipped at his hand yesterday. I have tried time-outs and explaining to him about not treating the dog badly. I have been guilty of slapping the dog on the back when she has taken food from my son's hand. After I saw him slap the dog, I decided not to model any of that kind of behavior again. My son even copies me if I raise my voice. What do I do? I'm afraid the dog will hurt my son.



This is a delicate problem because both child and dog need safety. You've already identified that if you are harsh with the dog, your son will copy you. If you roughhouse with the dog, your son will imitate that as well. Also, if your roughhouse with your son, he may have difficulty limiting his roughhousing with the dog.

To keep your son safe and to gradually teach him how to handle the dog gently, I suggest you gate off some of the house for your son and some for the dog. You can have your son practice how he should pet and handle the dog with a stuffed toy dog. Then give him a few minutes to pet your Dalmatian gently, under your supervision. Praise him and then remove him from the dog's part of the house. As he gets better at learning how to play with the dog gently, you can give him more time and eventually you'll be able to remove the gates and feel safe about leaving them together.

Don't assume your two-year-old is a mean child based on the aggressive behaviors you've described. He simply has to learn how to play with a pet. If you think your son is in real danger from your dog, you may have to part with the dog until your son is older. Perhaps a friend could keep the dog for a few months.

CREATIVE BOY IS BORED IN SCHOOL



Dear Dr. Sylvia,

Our mystery boy is our fourth child, and the biological baby of the family. Tim is a wonderful artist and has always wanted to work for Disney when he's an adult. He's taken tons of lessons, received many awards, and draws all the time, including during church and school. His test taking at school has always been poor. He admits to getting "clutched" but also drifts, as the teachers put it, and begins to draw on his paper and arrange the answers in an artistic fashion.

As you've said, "my son's creativity gets in his way." I know. I did poorly on multiple choice tests because I always wanted to argue for several different answers to be correct. I had a great time in philosophy in college and enjoy being a writer now and working at a store as a food buyer, where I can do lots of things and flit from one to another. Tim needs to get through math and biology so he can go to art school and work for Disney. How can we help him to do that?



Creative thinking can get in the way of test taking skills but creative kids can usually overcome that problem. I suggest they study by making up multiple choice tests as if they were the teacher. It helps students to focus on the important information that teachers wish to cover.

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Your son, however, is demonstrating an additional problem. He's received so much attention for his special talent that he's learned to use it to avoid doing less interesting work, which is undoubtedly harder for him. There are several important and realistic messages your son should receive from you and his teachers:

- Yes, you are very talented, but the competition to work for Disney is very keen. It's a goal to strive for, but think about other alternatives as well should your first choice not be possible.
- You can't even get close to Disney without an arts school or college education.
- Boredom comes with the territory of studying and test taking. Make a commitment to some boredom in high school with a better chance of a creative career, or avoid boredom in high school and expect it for the rest of your life. The most creative opportunities are available in careers that require a higher education.



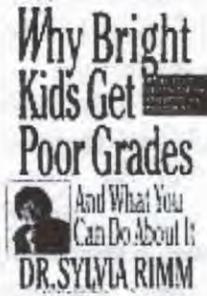
Be sure not to let your son use his creativity as an easy way out. You don't need to expect A's in science or math, but everyday study, homework, and concentration are musts. Suggest to your son that he do his boring work first and invent creative ways to study. It will help his efficiency if he looks forward to his art expression afterward.

It's most important for you and your husband to support each other in a clear message to your son. I often find that when kids are using creativity as an easy way out, moms and dads differ in their attitudes about creativity.

Sylvia Rimm On Raising Kids
Newspaper Column on Parenting
online at
www.creators.com/lifestylefeatures.html
 (next, click on Dr. Rimm's picture)

If this column is not in your local newspaper, suggest it to the editor.

"A six-step plan that actually makes sense."—*Washington Post Education Review*



**Help for parents
and educators**

**WHY BRIGHT KIDS
GET POOR GRADES—
AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT**

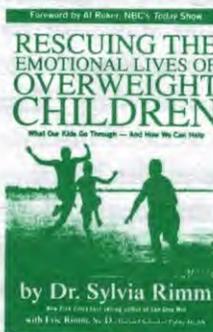
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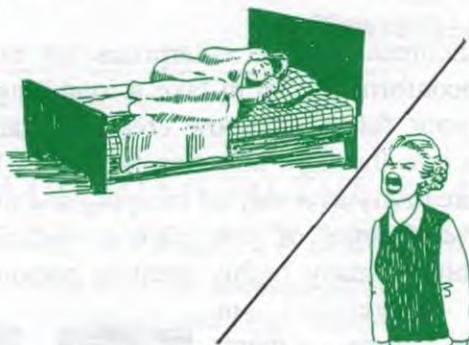
**What Our Kids Go Through—
And How We Can Help**

**by Sylvia Rimm, Ph.D.
With Eric Rimm, Sc.D.
Forward by Al Roker**

Dr. Rimm shows the emotional toll in the epidemic of overweight children—the first book to take an in-depth look at the lives of these children. She explains how overweight children struggle in school, have lowered expectations for the future, have troubling relationships with peers and adults, exhibit more high-risk behavior, and are even more misunderstood by their own families. Drawing on a national survey of middle school children, personal interviews, and case studies, Dr. Rimm outlines the ways that parents can make a positive difference in their children's lives.

Anti-Nag Morning Routine*

If your children get themselves ready for school effortlessly, there is no reason to change what you and they are doing now. However, if you find yourself nagging, scolding, and feeling exasperated every morning, it's time for a change, and you'll find this routine effective and a great relief for the family.



Step 1: Announce to your children one at a time the guidelines for the new beginning. From this day forth they will be responsible for getting themselves ready for school. Your job will be to await them at the breakfast table for a pleasant morning chat.

Step 2: Night-before preparations will include the laying out of their clothes and getting their book bags ready. An evening checklist will permit their preparation without your help. They should set the alarm early enough to allow plenty of morning time. They will feel just as tired at 7 a.m. as they will at 6:30, but the earlier start will prevent their rush.

Step 3: Children should wake themselves up, wash, dress, and pick up their room. A morning checklist can help them to remember each task. Breakfast comes only when they are ready for school. Absolutely no nagging!

Step 4: You can wait at the breakfast table. Be nowhere around them prior to your meal together. Then, enjoy a pleasant family breakfast and conversation about the day ahead!

Step 5: (Optional) If the children are ready early and enjoy TV, they can watch until it's time to leave.

Question: What happens if they don't dress in time for breakfast?

Answer: No breakfast. (That will only happen two or three times for children who like to eat.)

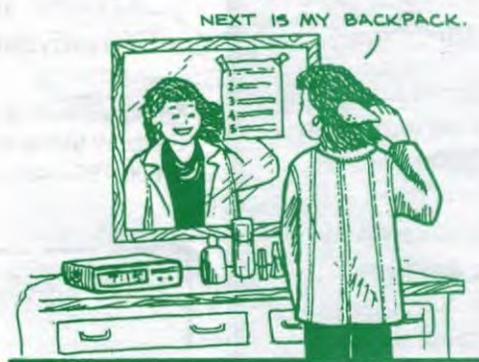
Question: What happens if my children don't like to eat breakfast?

Answer: Fifteen minutes of TV after breakfast, when they're ready for school, will probably be effective.

Question: What happens if they don't get up?

Answer: They miss school and stay in their room all day (that will happen no more than once), or you drive them to school and they pay you taxi fare out of their allowance, or they ride their bikes or walk. They deal with the school consequence of being late. Don't write them notes to excuse them.

ANTI-NAG MORNING



Question: What happens if they don't have enough time in the morning?

Answer: They go to bed 30 minutes earlier and set the alarm 30 minutes earlier until they find the right amount of time necessary for independent mornings.

Question: Does the routine work?

Answer: Absolutely with elementary-age and middle school children. They hate to miss school. Sometimes with high school students.



*Adapted from *Parent Pointers, Learning Leads* Q-Cards by Sylvia Rimm (1990, Apple Publishing Co. Available at 800-795-7466.)

Student Stepping Stones*

FIND THE BALANCE BETWEEN CREATIVITY & CONFORMITY

1. Creativity is a positively laden word. It suggests that you have good ideas and can make original contributions. It's a quality that our society values.
2. Sometimes creativity is too much. Sometimes it becomes nonconformity for its own sake. Sometimes it becomes a surface message to adults and other kids to simply notice that you dare to be different. Nonconformity and being different become dangerous to kids when they risk differences that close educational doors on themselves or risk their health or safety. If you refuse to jump some of the boring, conforming hurdles that are part of your education because you believe you should be allowed to engage in creative and interesting enterprises all of the time, you may in fact shut off opportunities for creative careers for your entire adult life.
3. Personal honesty is the key issue. Ask yourself what is truly motivating your nonconformity. Is it a worthwhile, productive motive? Then stay with it. Be strong enough to be independent.
4. Or is it a defensive battle where the issue has become to prove you have a right to "do your own thing"?
5. Sometimes creative enterprises are not even nonconformist. Try to take a long-range view of your future and how creativity can move you into the right direction instead of looking to creativity as a way of escaping and avoiding the challenges of your parents and teachers. Although many highly creative persons were not appreciated in their time, many others were. If your nonconformity is not valued now by your parents and teachers, there is no guarantee that people will value it in future years.
6. Find mentors and peers who encourage your achievement and your creative talent. Doors are wide open for hard-working, creative students.



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Sylvia B. Rimm, Ph.D., Director

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