

## GROUP PLAN FOR ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVERS

This section discusses an eight-session plan for students who have been identified as not achieving their academic potential. Students can be said to be underachieving when there is a discrepancy between the student's intelligence, as measured by a standardized intelligence test, and academic achievement, as measured by a standardized test of achievement. Even in the absence of the necessary standardized measurements, experienced teachers are often able to identify those students whom they feel should be getting higher grades.

There are several explanations for academic underachievement. One explanation is a policy of social promotions. Social promotion is a common practice in many school systems. To illustrate, a fourth-grade student who is functioning below grade level would be *promoted* or, more accurately, *placed* in the fifth grade because of age, rather than readiness. This results in a student who will not be able to function at a fifth-grade level because the student would be lacking the readiness, or fundamental skills needed, for being successful with the fifth-grade curriculum. Being socially promoted to the fifth grade would, undoubtedly, please the child, and it may please the parents, but being placed in a learning situation that is too advanced would not be in the child's best interest. Social promotion also rewards the student who has not earned promotion and reinforces the behaviors that contributed to the lack of academic achievement. As social promotions continue year after year, the student falls farther behind academic expectations and eventually is so far behind that catching up may not be possible without receiving extensive tutoring. It should not be surprising that these students become dropouts when they reach the legal age of quitting school.

Intervention with students who are underachieving should be initiated as soon as the problem is recognized. Underachievement can usually be identified in the elementary grades. It is not too late to intervene at the junior high or middle school levels, but it can be too late once the child is in high school.

Underachievement is seen in students who have a negative attitude toward school and lack the motivation to succeed academically. What makes underachievement an unfortunate problem is that these are children with ability and the potential to be successful in school. The group plan that follows addresses seven reasons that underlie the causes of the problem. These reasons are

1. Personal problems. Children who underachieve often have personal problems that distract them from attaining their academic potential, which includes having a negative attitude toward school.
2. Values. Education, as offered in schools, is not sufficiently valued.
3. Motivation. The motivation to succeed in school is low or lacking.
4. Home environment. The home environment can produce underachievement when one or more of the following conditions are present:
  - a. Education is not sufficiently valued by parents.
  - b. Home does not offer the child an adequate support system for being successful in school.
  - c. Parents are unaware of their role in helping their child succeed in school.
  - d. Parents are unable to help their child succeed in school.

- e. Communication between the school and home is inadequate.
  - f. Parental attitudes toward school are negative, which rubs off on the child.
5. Peer pressure. When a student has friends or identifies with a group that rejects school, it is unlikely that the child will acquire different attitudes. Peer pressure can produce underachievement when any of the following conditions are present:
- a. The peer group does not value education, and academic achievement is a low priority.
  - b. The child elects to adopt the values of the peer group.
  - c. The peer group is involved in behaviors that can affect ability and school performance, such as truancy or the use of illicit drugs.
  - d. The peer group discourages academic success through ridicule and other verbal punishing.
6. Priorities. School attendance and school performance are not high priorities for the student. Frequent excuses given by students who are underachieving are that school is boring or what is being taught lacks relevance.
7. Teacher attitudes. The attitude of teachers toward children who underachieve can also become a contributing factor. Teaching a student who has a negative attitude toward school and also shows oppositional behavior becomes a huge challenge for a teacher. Understandably, teachers often lose patience with underachieving students when they also disrupt the class, defy or reject the teacher's authority, or refuse to cooperate with a teacher's expectations. Regardless of the size of the class, there is only so much time a teacher can devote to a single student. Students who show an indifference to learning do not encourage teachers to take time away from those students who show an interest in learning. At some point, many teachers give up trying to change resistant attitudes. This serves to exacerbate the problem of underachievement.

The group counseling that is planned for these students differs somewhat from the usual eight-session model. It is a more intensive, multifaceted model requiring parental and teacher involvement and if used in a middle, junior high, or high school, should be co-led. It requires each of the members to attend eight 40-minute group sessions and also four 30-minute individual sessions. There would be six members in the group divided into two teams, three members in Team A and three members in Team B. The group members would have the option of naming their teams. One co-leader would be responsible for conducting the two individual counseling sessions with Team A, and the other co-leader would conduct the two individual counseling sessions with Team B. In the fifth week, the leaders would switch teams. In this way, both co-leaders will have had one-on-one contact with all members.

The purpose of the individual counseling sessions would be to (1) get ongoing member reactions to the group, (2) discuss the progress seen in the classroom from teacher input, (3) examine personal concerns that could be contributing to the academic problem, and (4) reinforce what is being discussed in the group. One of the subgoals of the leaders would be to encourage the group to become cohesive. The group would make plans to have lunch together at least three times a week, and the group leaders should join them for lunch at least once a week. There would be homework assignments that would require some group collaboration, and members would be encouraged to refer to each other by name during the

sessions, for example, "Don, I don't agree with you" or "I feel the same way, Joe." Frequent use of group members' names would aid in the bonding of the group. A photograph of the group and leaders would be taken at the first group session and would be posted in the group counseling location during all of the group sessions. Each member would be asked to sign the photograph and copies would be distributed to group members after the last session.

One parent, preferably both parents, would have to agree to actively participate in the program. Parents would be expected to attend two 1-hour parent-only group sessions. The first session would come after the second week of the program, and the second session would come after the seventh week. Parental involvement is a necessary part of the program because parents are assigned a role in helping their child attain grade-level performance.

Teachers have an important role in this program. The group leaders would meet with the teachers whose students are in the program to explain the details of the plan. They would be asked to follow the progress of their students who are in the group by completing a weekly progress report (see page 184) and by indicating what fundamental skills need to be addressed. A tutorial system utilizing classroom and/or resource teachers would be established.

The group members would be identified largely by teacher referral. This is not intended to be a group for students who exhibit severe school conduct problems, but rather for those students whom teachers feel are functioning below grade level and who have the potential for improving their grades. The co-leaders could approach a grade-level team for referrals. The screening interview with prospective group members would focus on the student who is interested in eventually being able to function at or near grade level and is willing to be cooperative. Students would be told that they would meet eight times as a group for 40 minutes and that every member would be seen four times for a 30-minute individual counseling session. They would also be told that their parent or parents would be required to participate in the program. Parent meetings would be early in the evening in order to accommodate parent work schedules.

If the student is interested in joining this group, a parent would be contacted and invited to participate in the program. The group leader would impress on the parent the importance of the group, why their child needs to be in this group, and that such an opportunity may not happen again. The group leader should also inform the parent that their child has more ability than is being shown and that their child's teachers will also be involved in the program. Parents would be told that unless they are willing to participate, their child cannot be in the program. A signed permission statement would have to be returned to the group leaders. This statement would commit the parent to attend both of the parent-only meetings.

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Target population: Seventh-grade students  
Number in the group: Six  
Gender: Mixed or homogeneous  
Number of group sessions: Eight  
Number of individual sessions: Four  
Time for each group session: 40 minutes

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Time for four individual sessions: 30 minutes  
Location: Counseling conference room  
Leadership: Co-leaders  
Time: Two-tier staggered days and times  
Planned follow-up: Four weeks after the last meeting

**SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION****Goals**

1. To welcome the group and introduce members to each other.
2. To introduce the co-leaders and explain the format of the group plan.
3. To identify the purpose of the group.
4. To establish group rules and the consequences of breaking a rule.
5. To review the expectations for membership in this group.
6. To get feedback from the group as to what each would like to accomplish in the group.
7. To present an icebreaker.
8. To announce the meeting schedule and method of informing members of meetings.

**Materials Needed**

Six copies of the Statement of Commitment (see page 184)

**Specific Strategies**

1. Explain the objectives of the group plan and all of the details of the program. Be sure the group understands what it will be expected to do. Explain how bonding, cohesiveness, and helping one another is important for the success of each group member.
2. Establish group rules. In addition to the standard rules and an emphasis on confidentiality, the need for perfect attendance should be stressed. Members should feel that it is a privilege to have been selected for this group.
3. Ask all members to indicate specific target goals or what they would like to accomplish through being in the group. Record their comments for future use.
4. Ask members to commit twelve weeks of their lives to working at changing their attitudes toward school by becoming highly motivated to improve their scholastic performance. The group will meet for eight weeks, and a single follow-up session is planned four weeks later. Explain how these twelve weeks could change a group member's future in school and, quite possibly, what the member will do after graduation. Impress upon the group that these twelve weeks could have a positive impact on each member's life. The group leaders would ask each member to sign a statement of commitment.
5. Icebreaker. Ask each member:
  - a. What would you say was the greatest invention?
  - b. If you were on an island by yourself, and there was no electricity or telephone, what three things would you like to have with you?
  - c. What would you do if you found an envelope on the street with nothing written on it and fifty 20-dollar bills were inside?
6. Inform the group of the staggered meeting schedule, describe the process by which they will be reminded of each meeting, set up the schedule for individual counseling sessions, and assign the groups to their first co-leader.
7. Announce that next week the group will begin to talk about motivation. Ask the group to think about the things they are motivated to do and report this to the group the next week.
8. Summarize the session.

**SESSION 2: ASSESSMENT OF MOTIVATION I****Goals**

1. To understand what each member is motivated to do.
2. To assess the motivation each member has to become successful in school.
3. To discuss each member's current priorities.
4. To begin to discuss motivation.

**Materials Needed**

A copy of the group rules should be brought to each group session.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary from the previous session.
2. Review the group rules.
3. Follow up on the assignment from the previous week to learn what each member is motivated to do (e.g., be a better ball player, become stronger, become rich, get a boy- or girlfriend).
4. Explore the basis for each member's attitude toward school.
5. Determine each group member's priorities and priority for schoolwork.
6. Inquire what it would take for each member to consider changing attitudes toward school to make learning a high priority.
7. Begin a discussion on motivation: what it is, why it is important, how we become motivated, and why becoming motivated can be difficult.
8. Homework assignment: Each member would be asked to set a target goal for improving classroom performance. A goal could be to complete a given number of homework assignments, ask a teacher for help, make a commitment to study for tests, or cooperate better with teachers.
9. Summarize the session.

**SESSION 3: MOTIVATION TO SUCCEED****Goals**

1. To continue the discussion on motivation from the previous week.
2. To open a discussion of the concept of success.
3. To discuss the concept of commitment.
4. To talk about study skills.

**Materials Needed**

Guidelines for good study skills for distribution to the group

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary from the previous session.
2. Review the group rules, if necessary.
3. Follow up on homework. Ask members to indicate their target goal for improving their classroom performance.
4. Discuss the feelings of each member relative to
  - a. How their parents view school.
  - b. How their peers view school.
  - c. How their siblings view school.
5. Explain motivation according to *should* levels, *will* levels, and *must* levels (see Session 5 of the self-esteem group plan, page 171).
6. Ask how each member can become motivated at the *must* level to attain goals.

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7. Open a discussion on the meaning of success. Why is success important? What does it take to be successful? Who are the people they know who are successful?
8. Open a discussion on commitment. What is meant by a commitment? Why is it important to be able to make a commitment? Why can it be difficult to make a commitment? Have any members ever made a commitment? If so, to what? Will each member make a commitment to improve their attitude toward school?
9. Homework assignment: Ask members to pick one subject with which they are having a problem and to ask that teacher what they could start doing that would improve their grade. Report the results to the class next week.
10. Distribute guidelines for good study skills.
11. Summarize the session.

**SESSION 4: VALUES****Goals**

1. To begin to examine values.
2. To assess the value each member places on education.
3. To discuss how values change throughout life.
4. To have members identify their immediate and future goals.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary from the previous session.
2. Review group rules, if necessary.
3. Ask each member to report on the homework assignment. What classroom subject was selected and what was done that could improve the grade in that class?
4. Open a discussion about values. What is a value? How do we acquire our values? Can values be changed? What are some of the values of the group members? Why is education a value?
5. Open a discussion on how our values change throughout life.
6. Ask each member to identify immediate goals and future goals. How realistic are their goals? What would they have to do if they are to meet their goals?
7. Discuss why doing our best in everything we do is both a value and a goal.
8. Homework assignment: Ask several friends what is important to them. Report the findings next week in group.
9. Summarize the session.

**SESSION 5: CONSEQUENCES****Goals**

1. To examine how all behavior has some consequence.
2. To examine the importance of our actions.
3. To understand the importance of graduating from high school.
4. To discuss the problem of feeling bored in school.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary from the previous session.
2. Ask the group to talk about the progress being made in class.
3. Open a discussion on how the past can explain the present and how the present can predict the future.

4. Examine the consequences of certain behaviors, including:
  - a. Breaking laws.
  - b. Hurting people's feelings.
  - c. Physically hurting someone.
  - d. Using illegal drugs.
  - e. Getting poor grades in school.
  - f. Dropping out of school.
5. Discuss role models and ask members to identify their role models.
6. Ask for reports on the homework assignment of finding out what is important to their peers.
7. Open a discussion on why students feel bored in school.
8. Ask the group how we can overcome feeling bored.
9. Summarize the session.

#### **SESSION 6: SCHOOL PROGRESS AND PRIORITIES**

##### **Goals**

Prior to this session, the co-leaders would have spoken with the teachers of the group members to learn if they have observed any changes in their students' attitudes or performance.

1. To evaluate the progress members have made in their schoolwork (e.g., test scores, turning in homework, classroom participation, attendance, teacher comments, specific problems).
2. To report on teacher comments that would reinforce the progress of specific group members.
3. To determine what help is needed for each member in specific classes.
4. To review the target goals that each member set in the second session.
5. To determine the priority of each group member for scholastic achievement. (A five-point scale could be used to help them evaluate their priority for doing schoolwork.)

##### **Materials Needed**

Reports from teachers indicating the progress of members (not to be distributed)

##### **Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary from the previous session.
2. Ask members to report on classroom progress.
3. Share positive teacher comments with the group.
4. Ask members what help they could use in specific subjects that would improve their classroom performance and grades.
5. Check progress made on the target goals each member set (from Session 2).
6. Ask members if they see evidence that their parents' attitudes toward school have changed as a result of the first parent-only session.
7. Open a discussion on priorities.
  - a. Define priorities.
  - b. Describe how we establish our priorities.
  - c. Ask what priorities are set for us by others.
  - d. Discuss why school achievement needs to be a high priority.
8. Homework assignment: Assign the group to identify one reason that might explain why students have negative attitudes toward school in preparation for next week's discussion on negative attitudes.
9. Remind the group there will be two more sessions.
10. Summarize the session.

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**Continued****SESSION 7: NEGATIVE ATTITUDES AND PEER PRESSURE****Goals**

1. To define negative thinking.
2. To identify the basis of negative thinking.
3. To open a discussion on negative attitudes toward school.
4. To examine peer pressure.

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary from the previous session.
2. Ask members to report on academic progress.
3. Open a discussion on negative thinking.
4. Follow up on the homework assignment. Ask each member to cite one reason that might explain why students would have a negative attitude toward school.
5. Discuss the impact of negative thinking on all aspects of life.
6. Talk about an antidote to negative thinking, such as becoming a positive thinker.
7. Define and ask the group for examples of peer pressure.
8. Discuss how peer pressure can be both helpful and harmful to us.
9. Ascertain if group members have felt peer pressure because of changes they may be making in their attitude toward school.
10. Open a discussion on why we get bored with something.
11. Remind the group that next week is the last session.
12. Summarize the session.

**SESSION 8: PERSONAL PROBLEMS****Goals**

1. To identify personal problems that can have a strong influence on school performance.
2. To show how distractions affect school performance.
3. To review the topics from previous sessions.
4. To evaluate the progress made in the group counseling.
5. To close the group sessions with a light refreshment.

**Materials Needed**

Evaluation forms for students  
Evaluation forms for teachers  
Healthy refreshments

**Specific Strategies**

1. Review the summary from the previous session.
2. Ask members to report on their academic progress.
3. Ask members how personal problems can affect school performance. Cite as examples when we are upset about something that happened at home or with a friend, when we are angry and are thinking about the thing that made us mad, when we are in trouble and worry about what will happen to us, when we are afraid that someone in school will tease or bully us, when we are too shy to ask a teacher for help when we don't understand something.
4. Ask the group to name things that can distract them from doing their best in school. Examples could be worrying, fear, feeling rejected by a boy- or girlfriend, not feeling



- well or having pain, thinking about what we are going to do after school, a problem at home, or remembering something that made us mad.
5. Review the key topics from the past seven weeks. This would include reference to motivation in general, motivation to succeed, priorities, education as a value, negative thinking, current and future personal goals, anticipating the consequences of behavior, overcoming peer pressure, reducing boredom, and removing distractions that would affect our school performance.
  6. Distribute an evaluation form to the members (see page 185).
  7. Have a light refreshment and thank the group for its cooperation. Inform the members that they are encouraged to make an appointment to see one of the group leaders for individual counseling.
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## FORMAT FOR PARENT-ONLY GROUPS

Parents would meet each meeting for 1 hour at a time convenient for the parents and group leaders. Early evening is recommended. At the first meeting, it is important that the principal, or an assistant principal, welcome the group and introduce the group leaders. The sessions would be discussions more than lectures, but the first meeting would begin with an explanation of what the program seeks to accomplish, a listing of the categories that will be covered in the eight sessions, the role of the teachers in the program, and the role of parents. Specifically, parents will be asked to communicate to their child (1) that they support the goals of the group plan, (2) that school and education are important values, (3) that they want their child to succeed in everything they do, (4) that success in school is very important, (5) that they will be following their child's progress more than they have, (5) that they will expect their child to do all homework assignments, and (6) that they will encourage their child to have perfect attendance and not be late for school. These points would be distributed to the parents in writing.

Discussions would be opened on such topics as

1. Parental views about education.
2. Parental views about the school.
3. Specific ways parents can help their child become more successful in school.
4. Problems parents may be having with the school.
5. Parental aspirations for their child.
6. Concerns parents have about their child.
7. Distractions parents feel could be impacting on their child's classroom performance.

The second meeting would discuss and evaluate changes parents are seeing in their child. The meeting could pursue any topics not covered in the first meeting and would encourage feedback on any subject related to their child's education. It should be geared to motivating parents to stay on course and assume some responsibility for their child's school success. Parents would be encouraged to inquire frequently about their child's progress, check with teachers to ascertain that homework is being completed, and discuss the results of test scores and grades. One objective of meeting with parents is to make the child aware