



The Trifocal Model for Reversing Underachievement Syndrome

What are the Steps of the Trifocal Model

Dr. Sylvia Rimm developed the Trifocal Model to help parents, teachers and students reverse the patterns of underachievement that often begin at home and soon make their way into the classroom. When students begin learning Greek and Latin prefixes, they quickly learn that “tri” means “three,” and the Trifocal Model is designed for three entities: the child, the parent(s) and the school. Although patterns of underachievement can be reversed without the help of parent(s) or teachers, it’s most effective when all parties work together to help the child reverse their habits of underachievement.

The Trifocal Model includes six steps (see figure A). The first five steps relate to all underachieving students, and the last step is branched so that specific modifications for specific types of underachievers can be used to target certain behavior patterns.

The first step, assessment, is vital to determining why type of underachiever the child is and the degree of underachievement. Parents and schools can use both informal and formal assessment measures to determine the area and level of underachievement both at home and in the classroom. Although it can be easy to recognize that a child is an underachiever, (due to a lack of completed assignments, inattention in class, or an overemphasis on extra curricular activities over

schoolwork) it can be more difficult to determine the type of underachiever a child is and what the scope of the underachievement is. It’s important not to skip this step, however, so that behavior modifications can be developed that match the type of underachievement.

Step 2, communication, can be initiated by either the parent(s) or the school; but the process is most effective when everyone is communicating with each other. It’s easy for all parties to get defensive about the child’s underachievement (and what they might have done to reinforce the behaviors), but Rimm writes, “When teachers plan to talk to parents, or vice versa, it is helpful to remember that both environments are reinforcing the underachieving patterns, and both parents and teachers should change their approaches to these children” (pg. 188). Clearly, the most important aspect of step 2 is to strive for honest, open communication with the goals of the child in mind.

After underachieving students have been identified, assessed, and there has been communication between the school and the families; the work to reverse the underachieving behaviors can begin. Many of these students (with the exception of Perfectionist Pearl and Academic Alice) have gotten used to low expectations (from their parents, teachers, and themselves). It’s



Figure A

Important to communicate to students that expectations are changing and that gradual improvement will be expected. It’s vital to give these students a clear message (from both parents and teachers) about what the process will look like, realistic goals for their improvement and helpful role models.

Since many of these underachievers have maintained their habits for years (especially once student get into the middle school and high school grades), they may have deficiencies in their skills. The use of tutors and specialized instruction should help catch up these students with their peers.

The final step of the Trifocal Model is the plan for modifications at home and at school. Choosing the most appropriate modifications will depend on the type of underachievement and the level of involvement at home.

Trifocal Model: Responsibility of the Parent

Reversing the patterns of underachievement will most likely be the most challenging for parents, who could feel guilty that they may have caused the patterns of underachieving behavior patterns. Along with guilt, parents might also be resistant to change and struggle implementing modifications.

In order for the Trifocal Model to be most effective, it's important for parents to communicate openly with schools and other parties (counselors, psychiatrists, etc.) about the specific changes that need to be made at home. It's vital that parents learn to work with their child's teachers, so that it is clear what is being done in the classroom and how they can support that at home.

Although challenging, parents will also need to be patient (especially at the beginning of the reversal process) and employ a little "tough love." It is important that parents remind themselves that it is their role to give their children skills/habits that they will need in the future and not what their child thinks they want in the present.

Additionally, it will be the parents role to communicate new expectations



The parents of underachieving students have an important role in reversing the behaviors at home and supporting the work being done at school.

to their child, and if children come from a two-parent home, both parents need to be on the same page and present a consistent message.

Trifocal Model: Responsibility of the Teacher

Although teachers have little control over what decisions parents make at home, they do have control over what happens in the classroom. Decisions about classroom structure, curriculum, the type of discipline/rewards, and communication with other adults (i.e. parents, other teachers, counselors, etc.) are all controlled by the classroom teacher and can make a big difference in reversing patterns of underachievement, no matter what is being done at home.

It's important for teachers to adequately pre-assess and strive to provide a differentiated curriculum, so that students are adequately challenged and supported in the areas they need to be. Additionally, it's imperative that teachers work to ally with all student, but especially those who are underachievers. If students truly believe that their teachers believe in them and listen to them, they are more likely to work hard to please those teachers. Furthermore, these students (especially the Domi-

nant Non-Conformers) are less likely to battle teachers they respect, and their behaviors in the classroom will improve.

"...many of the changes you can make for underachievers at school are similar to the changes parents should make at home..." (pg. 263).

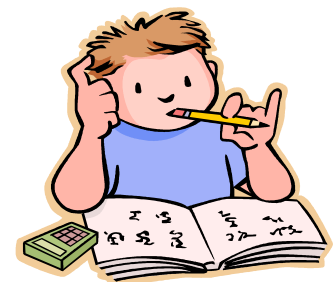
Trifocal Model: Responsibility of the Student

Deep down, I believe that all students want to feel successful and be an achiever. Somewhere down the line, however, some children have developed habits or been through a traumatic life change that has led them to be an underachiever.

In order for the Trifocal Model to be effective, the student must also be an active member of the team. It's their responsibility to try out new modifications, both at home and at school. All

modifications might not be effective, but students will need to actively employ them to gauge their effectiveness.

Although many of the decisions and changes will be implemented by adults, students do have the power to think about their friendships and what they are getting (or not getting) from their peers. Parents and teachers can surely give suggestions in this area, but which peers a child spends time with is most often their choice.



It's important to communicate expectations with students so that they can accept responsibility for meeting the new expectations.



