

kids' grades

His parents eventually realized, with the help of the wiser experts they consulted, that Charlie was in fact doing just fine for a child of his age and temperament. They also discovered that testing for learning disabilities had been recommended for almost every other boy in the class. "At a certain point," Miranda says, "you realize this is the school's problem, not the children's." Charlie, now in seventh grade, isn't as academic as some of his schoolmates, but he's a gifted writer who recently wrote a play translating Greek myths into hip-hop slang. His mother says he refers to his seventh and eighth years as "when was stupid."

As Charlie's story shows, schools often try to force kids into a "good student" mold. As a result, the typical classroom quelches learning, charges education madly Alfie Kohn in his new book, *The Schools Our Children Deserve*. Giving kids the message that good grades and pre-scripted "right" answers are the point of education, Kohn warns, "leads them to think less deeply, avoid challenges, and lose interest in learning."

Those with rebellious streaks often resist by putting more energy into resistance than into mastering new ideas and skills. That's been true of my son, who generally chose to do as little as possible. But how could I blame him for not wanting to copy 20 definitions out of the dictionary in longhand when I'd sooner scour a bathroom than do something that boring?

SUCCESS, REDEFINED

If I was sympathetic to my kid's rebelliousness, it's because people in my family were the same way. My husband got his only good high school grades in pottery and a social studies course taught by a

teacher who didn't believe in homework. My father was repeatedly kicked out of high school for talking back to the principal, cutting class to conduct an unauthorized fund-raising drive for the school orchestra (his sweetheart, my mom, played the cello), and generally being a pain in the rear. Both made it through college and went on to have rewarding careers: my husband as a writer with a sideline in real estate, and my father as a business executive and then—delicious irony!—college president.

Indeed, a study conducted by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., a child development specialist at the University of Pittsburgh, found that many academic under-achievers (particularly those lucky enough to have well-educated parents and a track record that includes some successes, though not necessarily academic ones) later catch up with their achieving peers.

Being a scholar doesn't guarantee a brilliant future, either. A 1996 study of high school valedictorians found that by the time they reached their 30s, most were successful, but few were outstanding. They follow the rules and work hard, but they're usually not superstars.

Stellar grades also don't guarantee that your vision of success and your child's will mesh. A friend of mine told me that her son, who had gotten into one of the country's most highly regarded universities on full scholarship, dropped out to sell "pre-owned" cars. "He's their top salesman, making \$4,000 a month, and he couldn't be happier," she says. "My straight-A student is a used-car salesman!"

Of course, none of this is to say that education isn't important. Especially in to-

day's economy, having at least some college or other advanced education (say, computer or medical technology training) on your résumé is essential. But that doesn't mean that everyone has to go to the kind of top-tier, highly selective school that makes perfect grades a requirement for admission. In fact, a substantial majority of U.S. colleges and universities accept most students who apply.

What's more, McCall points to research showing that while good students are somewhat more likely to pursue and receive advanced degrees, "there's a very small correlation between school performance and adult income, because there are many routes to making a buck besides formal education."

My son seems to have figured that out. He's now in an independent-study program that lets him work on his own and earn high school credit, not grades, while freelancing as a computer programmer. He's earning up to \$75 an hour, and he's not even out of high school.

Too bad I'm not going to parent-teacher night this year, because I can think of several teachers I'd love to tell that news to. □

LOUSY STUDENTS— BUT WINNERS AT LIFE

While some famous achievers started their success streak during their school days, many others took a



little longer to find themselves.

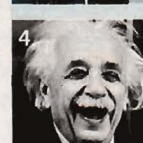
1. Ted Turner had a C-average in high school and went on to build a broadcasting empire.



2. Liz Claiborne was a high school dropout, yet this entrepreneur had the smarts to create a billion-dollar clothing-design company.



3. Whoopi Goldberg, who had trouble reading and never completed high school (she was later diagnosed as dyslexic), became an Oscar-winning movie star and one of the highest-paid women in Hollywood.



4. Albert Einstein's teachers thought he might be retarded, and he dropped out of school at age 15.



5. Howard Stern reportedly slept through high school and had the grades to prove it, but he went on to become a radio and movie star and best-selling author. "Everyone in my high school was smarter than me," he said later, "but I did better than all of them."

HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN

If your child just doesn't seem to click with school, don't give up. To help her get a leg up on learning, try these strategies from Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D., author of *In Their Own Way*.

Look into changing teachers, or even schools Research your child's current learning environment, then investigate alternatives, from asking for a new class assignment to home-schooling.

Create other opportunities for learning "Take the attitude that all of life is school," adds Armstrong. "Cooking, a trip to the beach, even a crummy TV show can be a learning resource if you approach it with creativity and genuine curiosity."

Get excited about learning Grow-ups who make the effort to master new ideas and skills send a powerful message about the true joys and rewards of learning.