

**SHE'S DOING EVERYTHING RIGHT... SO WHY IS SHE STRUGGLING?**  
**UNDERSTANDING INVISIBLE STRUGGLE IN HIGH ACHIEVING GIRLS**

# *A Practical Guide for Educators*

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# UNDERSTANDING THE “GOOD GIRL” PHENOMENON



In many classrooms, the “ideal student” is someone who is quiet, respectful, hardworking, and easy to manage. These students are often described as mature, responsible, or a “pleasure to have in class,” which can make it easy to assume they are doing well emotionally as well as academically.

But students who appear successful on the outside can still be struggling internally. Anxiety, perfectionism, fear of failure, and pressure to constantly meet expectations are often hidden beneath the image of being a “good student.” Because these struggles do not always disrupt the classroom environment, they can easily go unnoticed.

## Why This Matters

Schools do not just recognize “good students,” they actively shape and reward a specific version of what being “good” looks like. Behaviors such as compliance, emotional control, productivity, and achievement are often treated as indicators that a student is doing well overall. This guide explores how culturally shaped ideas of success can make high achieving girls seem like they are doing fine even when they are struggling, and why educators need to look beyond performance to understand students more fully. Over time, these pressures can contribute to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, perfectionism, burnout, and difficulty separating self-worth from achievement.



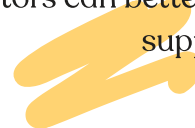
## WHAT THIS GUIDE EXPLORES

What we define as a “good” student

Why some students are overlooked

Why this matters emotionally & developmentally

How educators can better recognize & support students



# WHY THIS HAPPENS

## School Expectations & The Ideal Student

Schools often reward behaviors such as compliance, emotional control, productivity, independence, and achievement. Students who are organized, quiet, hardworking, and easy to manage are frequently viewed as successful not only academically, but personally and emotionally as well. However, these expectations are not neutral. Research and course readings suggest that ideas about what makes a “good student” are culturally shaped and reinforced within educational environments.

Li (2012) explains that beliefs about learning and achievement are shaped by cultural values surrounding effort, behavior, and success. Similarly, Rogoff (2003) describes learning as participation in cultural systems, meaning that schools do not simply observe student behavior, but actively shape and reward certain ways of behaving. Within many school settings, students who appear calm, capable, and high achieving are often perceived as needing less support because they align closely with institutional expectations of success.

At the same time, these expectations can unintentionally discourage emotional vulnerability. When students are consistently rewarded for being productive, agreeable, and emotionally controlled, they may begin to associate their worth with maintaining that image. As a result, students may hide stress, anxiety, or emotional struggles in order to continue appearing successful.



## Gender Expectations and Emotional Internalization

These pressures can become even more significant for girls because school expectations often overlap with broader gender expectations. Girls are frequently socialized to be polite, responsible, emotionally controlled, and accommodating. Because of this, many girls learn to internalize stress rather than express it outwardly.

Research on high-achieving girls suggests that achievement and identity can become deeply connected. In d'Anjou's (2025) research on high-achieving middle school girls, participants described intense stress, anxiety, and pressure surrounding achievement and learning identity. Similarly, Davey (2025) describes how high-achieving girls often experience pressure to embody the image of the academic "supergirl," where success becomes tied to self-worth and responsibility.

Research also shows that perfectionism and external expectations are strongly associated with increased school stress and emotional distress among adolescents. Díez et al. (2024) found that self-oriented perfectionism and parental expectations were significantly associated with higher levels of school stress and health complaints in secondary school students. Additionally, Zulfiqar and Abbasi (2024) found that high-achieving students experienced strong relationships between perfectionism, anxiety, and imposter phenomenon, with girls reporting higher levels of test anxiety and imposter feelings than boys.

Together, this research suggests that many high-achieving girls may feel pressure to constantly maintain success while hiding emotional struggles that do not fit the image of the "good student."



# WHAT DO EDUCATORS SEE?

Many high-achieving girls become skilled at presenting themselves as calm, capable, and emotionally put together, even when they are struggling internally. Because schools often rely on visible behaviors to determine who needs support, students whose distress is quieter or more internalized can easily be overlooked. As a result, emotional struggles may remain hidden beneath achievement, responsibility, and compliance.

Research on perfectionism, school stress, and emotional suppression suggests that students who strongly tie their identity to achievement may feel pressure to maintain the appearance of success even when experiencing anxiety or emotional exhaustion (Díez et al., 2024; Zulfiqar & Abbasi, 2024). Over time, this can make vulnerability and help-seeking feel increasingly difficult.

What Educators See	How Students May Feel
Quiet & Well Behaved	Afraid to speak up/make mistakes
High Achieving	Pressure to constantly maintain success
Independent	Fear of asking for help
Organized & Responsible	Anxiety about disappointing others
Calm and Composed	Stress, perfectionism, or burnout
Motivated & Driven	Self worth tied to achievement



# SUPPORTING BEYOND PERFORMANCE



Students whose struggles are less visible often become highly skilled at maintaining the image that they are doing well. Because many of these students are academically successful and behaviorally compliant, their distress may be interpreted as motivation, maturity, or dedication rather than anxiety or emotional overwhelm. Recognizing these quieter signs of struggle is an important step toward creating more emotionally responsive school environments. Because students experience achievement, belonging, and emotional expression differently across cultural backgrounds and identities, educators should avoid assuming that all students communicate stress or vulnerability in the same ways.

## Ways to Check In

Ask emotional questions beyond academics

Normalize asking for help and making mistakes

Praise effort, curiosity, and growth rather than perfection

Validate stress instead of minimizing

**~ Students deserve to be understood beyond how well they perform. ~**

## Signs You Might Be Missing

Rarely asks for help even when overwhelmed

Extreme fear of making mistakes

Over apologizing or self criticism

Pressure surrounding grades & achievement

Emotional shutdown or quiet withdrawal

Difficulty separating self worth from performance

Constant reassurance seeking

Feeling responsible to meet everyone's expectations



# CREATING EMOTIONALLY SAFE CLASSROOMS

## Normalize Mistakes

Students who strongly tie achievement to self-worth may view mistakes as personal failures rather than part of learning. Educators can help reduce perfectionistic thinking by openly normalizing mistakes, modeling vulnerability, and reinforcing that struggle is a natural part of growth.



## Broaden Definitions of Success

Schools often reward productivity, compliance, and achievement more visibly than creativity, emotional honesty, curiosity, or collaboration. Expanding what is recognized and valued within classrooms can help students feel seen beyond performance alone.

## Create Opportunities for Emotional Expression

Some students may not openly communicate stress in large group settings. Providing reflective writing opportunities, individual check-ins, or smaller discussion spaces can help students express emotions more comfortably and authentically.

## Avoid Praising Only Achievement

Students who are consistently praised only for grades, maturity, or responsibility may begin to believe that their worth depends on maintaining that image. Balancing praise with encouragement around effort, self-awareness, creativity, and resilience can support healthier identity development.



## Model Healthy Emotional Behaviors

Educators play an important role in shaping classroom culture. Modeling emotional honesty, self-compassion, and healthy coping strategies can help students feel safer expressing vulnerability themselves.



# QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS & SCHOOL COUNSELORS



## **Classroom Culture**

What behaviors do I reward most consistently?

Which students do I assume are “fine” without checking in?

How might my definition of a “good student” be culturally shaped?

## **Gender Expectations**

How are girls encouraged to express or suppress emotions in school settings?

Which students are praised for being “easy” or “mature”?

How might emotional internalization be misunderstood as resilience?



## **Support & Belonging**

Do students feel valued beyond achievement?

What opportunities exist for emotional honesty in my classroom?

How can schools create environments where asking for help feels safe?





# LOOKING BEYOND PERFORMANCE

At its core, this project is about recognizing that outward achievement does not always reflect emotional well-being. Many high-achieving girls learn to present themselves as calm, capable, responsible, and successful, even when experiencing significant internal pressure or emotional distress. Because schools often reward productivity, emotional control, compliance, and achievement, these students can easily become the ones educators worry about the least.

Research throughout this project demonstrates that achievement, perfectionism, belonging, and identity can become deeply interconnected for many girls navigating school environments (d'Anjou, 2025; Davey, 2025; Zulfiqar & Abbasi, 2024). These experiences are not simply individual struggles, but reflections of broader cultural and educational expectations surrounding success, gender, and emotional expression.



Although this project primarily focuses on high-achieving girls within school environments in the United States, the broader need to feel seen, emotionally safe, and valued beyond performance is universal across students and educational contexts. Different cultures and school systems may define success differently, but many students still experience pressure surrounding achievement, belonging, and identity in ways that can shape their emotional well-being.

This project does not argue that achievement itself is harmful. Rather, it highlights the importance of understanding students more fully beyond visible performance alone. Success and struggle can exist at the same time.

When educators create environments where vulnerability is normalized and students feel valued beyond what they accomplish, schools become safer and more supportive places for all students. Ultimately, students deserve to feel valued not only for what they achieve, but for who they are.

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