



Classroom Management Series

Step-by-Step Guide to Setting up Your Classroom

Part IV – Factors Affecting Curriculum for Children with Special Needs

Section A- Factors Affecting Curriculum Performance

Children and adults are exposed to a variety of stressors on any given day. For children, these stressors may manifest themselves in school related symptoms which result in dysfunction. All problems create tension. This tension must be relieved either verbally or behaviorally. If a child is unable to communicate his feelings, as is the case for most children, then that tension will exhibit itself in symptomatic behavior. This symptomatic behavior is what teachers see every day in the classroom. While symptoms may not always indicate a serious problem, the frequency, intensity, and duration of the symptoms usually do.

Teachers are confronted with symptomatic behavior every day. If they do not understand the nature of the symptoms, they will treat them as problems. Treating a fever as a problem will never cure the infection. While it is true that teachers need not “cure” the problem, it is important that they recognize symptom patterns of a more serious condition so that the proper referrals can be made.

If a teacher understands the nature of symptomatic behavior and makes the proper referral for guidance, then a more serious problem can be averted. However, even if correctly identified, a child's symptomatic behavior may take a while to dissipate. It is during this time that teachers can use certain techniques which may calm the child, provide suitable boundaries, reduce classroom frustration, and so on, while the real problem is being resolved. You will be provided with an understanding of what factors may create the observed symptoms, guidance for further referral if necessary, and classroom techniques which can assist you in helping the child reduce the impact of the symptoms.

However, before this, we will discuss nine factors which can contribute stress in a child's life. Any of these factors, if intense enough, can create classroom symptoms resulting in academic, behavioral or social dysfunction.

Academic Factors

There will always be times when academic deficits will impair a child's ability to function in the classroom. Factors that can contribute to academic dysfunction include but are not limited to:

- developmental reading disorders
- developmental math disorders
- developmental writing disorders
- developmental spelling disorders
- poor prior teaching
- lack of basic skills
- inconsistency during critical periods of skill development
- problems in concept formation
- lack of reinforcement

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors are defined as those factors which the child may be exposed to at home or in the community which may have a profound impact on the child's ability to function in school. These factors may include home issues such as:

- parental abuse
- parenting fighting
- separation
- divorce
- family illness
- economic hardships
- loss of parent's job
- moving into a new neighborhood
- serious sibling rivalry
- family mental illness
- relatives residing in the home

- alcoholism
- drug abuse

Environmental factors may also originate from community issues such as:

- problems with neighbors
- poor reputation in the neighborhood
- isolation of the family from neighbors
- problems with the law

Intellectual Factors

There may be times when a child's difficulties in school may be the result of intellectual factors. When these factors are present, a child's stress may be manifested in a variety of symptoms. The factors which fall under this category include:

- Undetected limited intellectual ability
- Undetected gifted intellectual capacity

Language Factors

Language provides the foundation upon which communication, problem solving, integrating, analyzing, and synthesizing knowledge takes place. Therefore, deficits in language can have a profound impact on the ability of an individual to learn and function competently and confidently as he interacts in the world.

Difficulties may arise in a child's language development resulting in classroom symptoms. These language issues may arise from difficulties in:

- nonverbal language
- oral language (i.e., listening and speaking)
- written language (i.e., reading and writing),
- pragmatic language (e.g., using language for a specific purpose such as asking for help)
- phonology
- audiology.
- word retrieval
- articulation
- receptive aphasia

- expressive aphasia
- bilingualism

Medical Factors

Medical factors which may contribute to a child's academic dysfunction can be numerous. While teacher's are not asked to be doctors, certain medical conditions may manifest certain symptoms in the classroom. For the most part, one would assume that any serious medical condition may have already been identified by the child's pediatrician or parent. However, this may not always be the case , especially in the cases of very young children. However, certain more common medical problems that may impair a child's ability to function adequately in the classroom may include but are not limited to:

- attention deficit disorder
- vision problems
- hearing problems
- neurological problems
- muscular problems
- coordination problems

Perceptual Factors

There are times when perceptual issues can impair a child's ability to function in the classroom. While perceptual deficits are often misunderstood or undiagnosed, they do account for a large number of high risk children. Being able to identify the symptoms that may be caused by serious perceptual deficits can only reduce a child's frustration, both in and out of the classroom. Perception is a process that involves many different areas. While most of us take it for granted, for some children it represents a very difficult, frustrating and deflating experience.

The learning process is like an assembly line through which information received travels. Information is received in some manner, and is filtered through a series of psychological processes. As information progresses along this "assembly line", it is given meaning and organized in some fashion, and then expressed through a variety of responses. When we evaluate a child's perceptual abilities, we are looking to see if there is a deficit in some area of

the learning process that may be slowing down the processing of information, thereby interfering in the child's ability to receive, organize, memorize or express information. Severe deficits in the learning process can have adverse affects upon a child's academic performance.

It is therefore imperative that teachers and other professionals identify those areas which may have a direct impact on a child's ability to adequately process information and possibly interfere in his academic achievement as soon as possible.

Psychological Factors

Psychological factors which may be contributing to a child's dysfunction in school may include but are not limited to:

- clinical depression
- mental illness
- anxiety
- eating disorders
- personality disorders
- schizophrenia
- phobias
- obsessive compulsive disorders
- psychosexual dysfunction
- substance abuse
- sleep disorders
- brief situational disturbances or adjustment reactions
- conduct disorders
- separation anxiety
- oppositional defiant disorders

Social Factors

Social factors may contribute to a child's stress and consequently interfere with learning. While social status is a crucial factor at many ages, it becomes more of a factor as one approaches the period of adolescence. Social pressures and peer influence sometimes create an imbalance in a child's functioning. This imbalance may often result in lower available energy for school related issues because of the intense need for energy to cope with his social world or social conflicts. Social factors which may lower available energy and result in academic dysfunction include:

- peer rejection
- preoccupation with boyfriend or girlfriend
- low social status
- social victimization
- scapegoat
- difficulty with social intimidation
- victim of bully behavior
- social control issues-the need to be in control
- peer competition
- social isolation
- social overindulgence

It would be helpful at the beginning of the semester to try to determine which of these areas affect each of your students. Once you have determined this you may need assistance from other staff members to help the student. The next part of this series will focus on **Adapting the Curriculum for Children with Special Needs**.

Adapted from the Special Educator's Survival Guide/Pierangelo/2005/ Jossey Bass Publishers