

Assessment in Special Education - Part 1

Identification of High Risk Students

Introduction

A high risk child is any child who is experiencing social, academic, emotional, medical, language, perceptual, or environmental turmoil that prevent him/her from performing up to his/her ability in school. As a result of this intense turmoil, many symptoms are generated in a dynamic attempt to alleviate the anxiety or feelings of inadequacy. This part of the **Assessment in Special Education Series** looks at the symptoms exhibited by high risk children and provides a frame of reference so that these children can be identified as quickly as possible.

Step 1- Determine Who Gets Assessed for a Suspected Disability: Identification of High Risk Students

A. Understand the Meaning of a “High Risk” Student

The determination of who will receive a comprehensive assessment for a suspected disability is a process that normally begins with the local school. In most states, each school will have a committee called the Child Study Team (Pupil Personnel Team, School Based Support Team etc.) which reviews children who are considered high risk. High-risk children may exhibit many different behavior patterns. Some of the more common ones that can be exhibited by either elementary or secondary students while in school are:

- A history of adequate or high first quarter grades followed by a downward trend leading to failures in the final quarter.
- A history of excessive absences.
- A history of excessive lateness.
- Frequently cannot separate from parent at the start of the school day. While this can be normal behavior in very young children, it becomes a more serious symptom after age 6 or 7.
- High achievement scores and high school abilities index with a history of low academic performance.
- Consistent failure in two or more quarters of at least two subjects.
- A history of parent "coverage" for inappropriate behavior, poor work performance, poor attitude, failures, or absences.
- Students wandering the halls after school with no direction or purpose.
- A history of constant projection onto others as a reason for a lack of performance, handing in work, failures, or cutting.

- A history of feeling powerless in the student's approach to problems.
- Recent stress related experiences i.e. divorce, separation, death of a parent or parent's loss of employment.
- A history of constant visits to the nurse.
- Social withdrawal from peers with an emphasis on developing relationships with adult

B. High Risk Students: Determine the Severity of the Problem

While many symptoms may indicate a problem, certain guidelines should be used to determine the severity of the situation:

- 1) **Determine the frequency of the symptoms** - Consider how often the symptoms occur. In general, the greater the frequency, the greater chance of a serious problem
- 2) **Determine the duration of the symptoms** - Consider how long the symptoms last. In general, the longer the duration the more serious the problem.
- 3) **Determine the intensity of the symptoms** - Consider how serious the reactions are at the time of occurrence. In general, the more intense a symptom, the more serious the problem.

C. Understand How Tension Affects High Risk Students

Dynamic problems (e.g., conflicts, fears, insecurities) create tension. Normally, the more serious the problem, or the greater number of problems experienced by a child, the greater the level of tension. When tension is present, behavior is used to relieve the tension. When serious problems exist, the behavior required to relieve this tension becomes more immediate. As a result, the behavior may be inappropriate and impulsive rather than well thought out.

When tension is very high it may require a variety of behaviors to relieve the dynamic stress. These behaviors then become symptoms of the seriousness of the problem. That is why the frequency and intensity of the symptomatic behavior reflects the seriousness of the underlying problem/s.

As the child becomes more confident or learns to work out his problems i.e. through therapy, the underlying problems become smaller. As a result, they generate less tension and consequently less inappropriate, impulsive or self-destructive behavior patterns.

Symptomatic Behavior Possibly Indicating More Serious Problems in Students

Examples of typical symptomatic behavior that may be indicative of more serious concerns may include the following:

- -impulsivity -lies constantly
- -frequently hands in incomplete work -awkward
- -give excuses for inappropriate behavior -fearful of adults
- -constantly blames others for problems -fearful of new situations
- -panics easily -verbally hesitant
- -distractible -hypoactive
- -short attention span -hyperactive

- -over-reactive -fears criticism
- -physical with others -rarely takes chances
- -intrusive -moody
- -unable to focus on task -defies authority
- -procrastinates -anxious
- -squints -not able to generalize
- -turns head while listening -insecure
- -disorganization -trouble starting work
- -inflexibility -tires easily
- -irresponsibility -controlling
- -poor judgment -overly critical
- -denial -forgetfulness
- -daydreaming -painfully shy
- -unwillingness to venture a guess -overly social
- -unwillingness to reason -slow starter
- -social withdrawal -argumentative
- -constant use of self criticism -destroys property
- -bullies other children -lazy
- -needs constant reassurance -inconsistency
- -poor reader -poor spelling
- -argumentative

D. Become Familiar with Common Avoidance Behavior Patterns Exhibited By High Risk Children

Avoidance behaviors are common "tools " utilized by children who are experiencing problems in learning. Children will often exhibit these symptoms at home and at school to avoid loss of parental approval, peer humiliation or fear of failure. **Examples include:**

Selective forgetting - The selectivity of the forgetfulness usually centers on areas of learning that may be creating frustration.

Forgets to write down assignments day after day - The avoidance of a perceived failure experience is accomplished through the use of this behavior.

Takes hours to complete homework - This symptom also occurs if a child is under tension and cannot concentrate for long periods of time. He/she will tend to "burn out "quickly and day dream the night away.

Finishes homework very quickly - In this type of symptom the child's major objective is to get the ego-threatening situation (homework) over as quickly as possible. Every attempt is made to "rush " through the assignments with little if any care or patience.

Can't seem to get started with homework - When a child's anxiety level is very high it makes it very difficult to "start the engine." They may spend a great deal of time getting "ready " for the homework by arranging their books, sharpening pencils, getting the paper out, opening the textbooks, getting a glass of water, going to the bathroom and so on, but never really starting their assignments.

Frequently brings home unfinished class work - Students for several reasons frequently exhibit this symptom:

- One reason is a low energy level and therefore problems dealing with tasks involving sustained concentration.
- The second reason may involve the concept of learned helplessness and may arise when a parent constantly sits next to a child when he/she is doing homework. The child becomes conditioned to this assistance and is helpless without it.
- The third reason may involve the child's need for attention. Bringing home-unfinished class work necessitates some parent's need to sit with them and complete the work. This "captive audience " of parent attention is reinforced when a parent tries to leave.

Consistently leaves long term assignments until the last minute - Avoidance of school related tasks, especially long-term ones, is a frequent symptom of children with low energy levels.

Complains of headaches, stomachaches and other physical ailments before or after school -

Very high-tension levels over an extended period of time may result in somatic (bodily) complaints. These complaints, while real to the child, may indicate an avoidance of an uncomfortable or ego deflating situation. When a child has a pattern of these types of complaints, then the teacher needs to see this "signal" as a symptom of a more serious problem.

Exhibits "spot light "behaviors - "Spot light " behaviors are any behaviors that bring the focus of attention to the child i.e. calling out, laughing out loud, getting up out of seat, annoying other children. When this occurs it is usually a release of tension:

- Some children use "spot light " behaviors to alleviate the tension of academic inadequacy and may even hope to get into trouble to leave the room.
- Another reason for "spot light " behaviors is control. However, keep in mind that the more controlling a child is, the more out of control they feel.
- The third reason for "spot light "behaviors is for the sole purpose of gaining the teachers attention. However in this way the child is determining when he/she gets attention, not the teacher.