



Behavior Management Series–Issue #12

Why Children Tune Out

Academic: Some children, regardless of the interest level, will do what is required of them. However, many children have great difficulty attending to a task when the task is boring for them. Any boring task for these children will create total disinterest on their part, leading them to tune out to what is being said to them. Also, children who are academically lost, overwhelmed or confused will tune out since staying focused only reinforces their feelings of inadequacy.

Environmental: Some children will tune out to things because there are many problems at home. There may be a nasty divorce battle between the parents, possible neglect or abuse or simply just an disorganized and out of control household. In order to not deal with the pain of what is happening within the family, these children will simply tune it all out. They are then able to master this ability not just to home life but to all areas of life.

Intellectual: For some children, their limited intelligence can hinder their attention span. Children with limited intellectual ability may not have the intellectual stamina to remain focused, especially on abstract concepts. As a result, these children tend to get overwhelmed quickly and tune out. In the same light, those children with very high intelligence (e.g.; gifted children) may also have great difficulty with attention span in school because they become rapidly bored in a classroom designed for average children. In both cases, the lack of attention span will lead to tuning out certain things around them.

Language: When students have difficulty understanding a language, they can have a hard time with their class work. Because it can take them much longer to read a passage or understand a lecture, they can become rapidly frustrated and give up. This then leads them to tune out to what is going on around them.

Medical: There are many different theories as to what causes short attention spans and an inability to stay on task. One of these theories involves a disability in attention know as Attention Deficit Disorder. Further, children who are hard of hearing may tune out since they are unable to completely understand what is going on. Some forms of medication may affect some children and create difficulties in concentration and focus.

Perceptual: Children with memory or retrieval problems may tune out when they become unable to keep up with the lessons or lectures given by the teacher. Slow processing of information may cause some children to lose their place easily and fall behind. Children who perceive the world or tasks differently from others can become frustrated in trying to complete

class work. These children may put a great deal of effort into academic tasks but the frequent failures often results in giving up, often exhibited by tuning out.

Psychological: Some children tune out certain things in life because of depression and anxiety. When things are not going well for children, they will not have the energy to focus on what may be important. If they are worried or scared about various things in their lives, they will “tune out to the rest of the world” because they do not have the mental strength to tune into what everyone else is doing. Children who tune out, may be doing so because they are overwhelmed. Extreme tension, worry, conflict or problems create such high levels of anxiety that it is like filling a room with water, resulting in very little “available space” for attention or focus.. Everything soon becomes cloudy and children lose focus and motivation quickly. Since the tension is taking up so much room, the child has very little left for absorbing any information. What results is tuning out.

Social: Some children tune out to things in school because they are completely wrapped up in their social lives. They cannot do math or social studies not because of its difficulties but rather because they have so many other social concerns to care about in their lives. All of these social issues begin to take preference over academic work, thereby tuning out important areas of life.

What To Do When This Happens

- Check with the school nurse and the child’s parents to be sure that there is no medical problem which may be causing the difficulty which may cause the child to tune out.
- Try to reduce the amount auditory or visual stimuli in the classroom do that the child does not have too many things to focus on at one time.
- Talk with the child about why he feels that he tunes out.
- Reinforce the student with verbal praise when you notice him on task. Even if it is for a brief period of time, this will help build the confidence of the child.
- Try to get involved with what the student is doing when he has to stay on task. By interacting with him, you may give him a greater chance of focusing on what he has to do.
- Have the student work in groups with students whom you know have very good attention spans.
- Have the student write down what it is exactly that he must do. Often, children who cannot stay on task will forget what they were required to do because they have been focusing on other stimuli. By having the directions written down, it enables the child to get back on track and maintain his original focus.
- Try to change the topics in the lesson as often as possible. Although this may be difficult due to the number of students in your class, contact the special education coordinator and school psychologist to see how other teachers handle this situation.
- Seat the child in the front of the class so that he will have a greater chance of not being distracted by the other stimuli within the room.
- Call on the child more often than others without it being too obvious. By keeping the child on his toes, this will increase the chances that his attention will be more focused.
- If the problem persists to the point where it is affecting the child’s everyday functioning, his situation should be brought up to the Child Study Team in the school so that his situation be appropriately evaluated.

Why Some Children Exhibit Twitches and Tics?

Academic Possibilities: Severe academic pressure may cause a child to release his nervous tension through behavioral outlets. Twitches, tics, eye blinking, head turning may all be forms of tension release.

Environmental Possibilities: If not medically based, twitches and tics may occur in homes where stress levels, and/or expectation levels on the part of parents are very high. The pressures from parents create tremendous concern, fear, worry and apprehension on the part of children and the release of this tension is exhibited in the form of tics or twitches.

Intellectual Possibilities: Children with limited intellectual ability who find themselves in situations where they are overwhelmed on a regular basis may exhibit such behaviors.

Language Possibilities: Same as Academic Possibilities

Medical Possibilities: Tourette Syndrome (TS) is a neurological disorder that appears to be genetically transmitted in most cases. Tourette Syndrome is one of a number of disorders classified as Tic Disorders. Tics are involuntary movements which present themselves through motor or sound.

The first tics or symptoms of Tourette Syndrome are usually simple motor tics of the head, face, and neck area. Simple motor tics are usually rapid, apparently purposeless and repetitive movements of one muscle group. Examples of simple motor tics include the following:

Motor

- eye blinking
- shoulder shrugs
- mouth opening
- arm extending
- facial grimaces
- lip-licking
- rolling eyes
- squinting

Complex motor tics are involuntary movements that involve the coordinated sequence or activation of two or more muscle groups. Examples include:

- pulling at clothes
- touching people
- touching objects
- smelling fingers
- jumping or skipping
- poking or jabbing
- punching
- kicking
- hopping
- kissing self or others
- flapping arms

- twirling around
- thrusting movements of groin or torso
- walking on toes
- copropraxia: sexually touching self or others, obscene gestures
- self injurious behavior

Perceptual Possibilities: Not Applicable

Psychological Possibilities: It is not unusual for some children to vent their tensions through certain types of behaviors i.e. twitching, blinking. However, the frequency, intensity and duration of the symptoms must be should be examined for the possibility of other causes. (See Medical Possibilities in this section). Children who are under tremendous stress may exhibit these symptoms as well.

Social Possibilities: Extreme social stress, social confusion or worry and so on may cause a child to vent fears in behavioral patterns. The pressure on children who are constant victims of social groups or individuals may result in this pattern as well.

What To Do When This Happens

- This is an issue where we strongly recommend that you immediately seek out consultation with the school psychologist, school nurse and the principal for purposes of the child's safety, your liability , the school's liability, and the parent's rights.

Why Some Children Are Always Victimized By Other Children

Academic: Children may be victimized by others for either being too smart or not smart enough. First, regarding smart children, their academic performance may creates an “unconscious jealousy” on the part of others, leading to victimization. Regarding children who may not be smart, these children will get picked on because of their failures. They are easy targets due to their lack of success in the classroom, compliance or passivity.

Environmental: In some homes, children are not taught to “fight back”. Instead, they learn that it is best to be a passive observer. They may believe that fighting is always wrong or that they are afraid to fight because of the ramifications which will occur at home. Therefore, when a bully realizes that a child is not going to fight back, he may victimize this child since there will not be any resistance.

Also, children who are victimized at home sometimes repeat this behavior in school. Their abuse or neglect at home makes them feel worthless and insignificant. They do not possess the inner strength or resources to counteract this adult behavior and become fearful and compliant in order to survive. This pattern is then repeated in school by certain children who “feed off” these victims.

Intellectual: Same motive as Academic, and also fragile or intellectually limited children may often be the victims of others because of verbal or social behaviors that may be misunderstood.

Language: Some children who have difficulties with language may have an accent or have difficulty speaking clearly. Consequently, bullies in the class will find this amusing and pick on them. If the child does not fight back and stand up for himself, the victimization may continue for a long period of time.

Medical: Some children may get picked on and victimized by bullies because they are medically frail or smaller in stature than other children their age. Because of their height and weight disadvantage, they become easy targets for those who look to victimize.

Perceptual: Not Applicable

Psychological: Children with weak egos and low self-esteem may believe that they cannot stand up for themselves regarding any issue. They believe in their minds that they are weaker and inferior to others. As such, bullies recognize this mental weakness and start to pick on them. If these children do not fight back because psychologically they have given up, the bullying will most likely continue.

Certain types of personality styles or demeanors i.e. fragile looking, physically different may bring on victimization by other inadequate children who need to seek victims to reduce their own feelings of inadequacy. These children seek out the path of least resistance and have a type of “radar” that can zero in on children who will provide little resistance. These victims may be loners, non assertive children with low self worth or new children who have not yet connected to some social group.

Social: Some children cannot fit in with the crowd. As hard as they try, they just cannot be accepted as part of the group. When bullies see that a child is not fitting in socially, they may begin to pick on him. Socially, the child has no friends to turn to for aid or help. This can create much anxiety and fear, leading quite often to an even greater social withdrawal than what was even previously experienced.

What To Do When This Happens

- Have a class lecture about how you will not tolerate rude and insensitive behavior towards any one in the class. Stress the importance of kindness and treating people nicely and with compassion.
- Have a conference with the student to discuss why the student feels he is always being victimized.
- Have the child work in small groups with other students. In the groups, pick this child to be the leader of the group. Here, the child’s confidence may increase dramatically due to the fact that he now has to be the one in charge rather than the victim.
- Have a very firm talk with the class about class rules and the consequences for any student who treats another with disrespect.
- Have the school counselor, social worker, or any other mental health professional give a talk to the class about respect and feelings. Hearing from others can be greatly beneficial to a class. This can also enlighten the student who is being victimized about how others should be treating him.
- Have a 1 on 1 discussion with the child and role play what actually happens in the child’s life. Perhaps by doing this, the child will learn greater coping skills.
- Discuss with the school psychologist about the possibility of counseling to help promote the child’s self-worth and confidence levels.

- Contact the parents if the problem becomes so serious that you believe that the child may be in danger.
- If the problem persists to the point where it is affecting the child's everyday functioning, his situation should be brought up to the Child Study Team in the school so that his situation is appropriately evaluated.

Why Some Children Tattle On Other Children

Note: In this section we are only referring to tattling that is only motivated by harm to others. This does not refer to tattling on someone who has done something that may be harmful or dangerous to others.

Academic Possibilities: Not Applicable

Environmental Possibilities: Tattling on children may arise from children not getting enough attention at home. These children then believe that they will receive needed attention by bringing some “information” to the surrogate authority, namely the teacher.

Intellectual Possibilities: Not Applicable

Language Possibilities: Not Applicable

Medical Possibilities: Not Applicable

Perceptual Possibilities: Not Applicable

Psychological Possibilities: Children with low self esteem may feel that devaluing another child through tattling may enhance their status. These children have what is known as a single focus ; to gain the validation or attention of the authority figure. In doing so they do not see the harm or social consequences of their actions. Their low self esteem fogs their reasoning and their anxiety causes them to act without thinking.

Social Possibilities: Some children will tattle on others to gain social acceptance. Bringing what they believe is important information to the group may be an attempt to gain status or a stronger foothold in the group.

What To Do When This Happens

- As soon as you notice that a child is tattling on another, sit the student down and discuss with him why tattling is not a very good trait. Explain why tattling is wrong and what it does to others.
- Be firm with the student but realize that tattling is something that does occur in elementary schools. Therefore, be firm with what you say but not too harsh. Some children really do not know any better.
- Explain to the student that in your class you do not allow tattling. Let him know what will happen if this occurs again.
- Since you do not allow for tattling, you must teach the student what to do with information when he gets it. It is important that he understands what information he should tell you and what information should be kept to himself.

- Have the school psychologist give a talk to the class about other people's feelings and respect for others. He can also speak of trust, which can be very damages when tattling starts.
- Explain to the class as a whole what to do when they feel frustrated or upset. Sometimes children who tattle are doing so because they are frustrated by what is happening at that time so they "tell on others".
- Have the student sit next to other students who are "more mature". In this way, these student can be role models for him. By watching these children act appropriately, the student will realize that there other mechanisms to us other than tattling.
- Verbally praise the student when you notice a time when tattling would have been easy to do but the child used some other method to solve the problem. Let him know how proud you are of his behavior and that you appreciate his effort to handle the situation in a different way.

If the situation does not get better over time, have a conference with the parents to discuss whether there are any extenuating circumstances.

Why Children Make Up Stories

Academic Possibilities: Children who get poor grades may have a tendency to lie about their performance. This is most often due to a sense of embarrassment on their part. Their academic failure can create anxiety on how they will be perceived by others. Consequently, they make up stories to emotionally survive their academic inadequacies.

Environmental Possibilities: Some children live in homes where the main goal is to "be the best". For some of these children, that will never be possible. Yet, it is the only way they are accepted by their parents. To survive, when they do poorly on an exam or get in trouble, they know that if they tell the truth they will be yelled at, punished or maybe something even more severe. Therefore, they make up stories in order to deal with the fact that in order to please their parents they must excel at everything that they do.

Intellectual Possibilities: Same motives as Social and Perceptual

Language Possibilities: Not Applicable

Medical Possibilities: Not Applicable

Perceptual Possibilities: Children with perceptual problems may have difficulty reading. In the process, they may make up stories about what they have read because they were not able to read nor comprehend what they were assigned to read.

Psychological Possibilities: Some children have a psychological need to make up stories. It gives them a sense of power and status in their lives. For some, the stories are harmless and are being used only to try and show people how good they are. Yet, for others, the stories can be quite problematic. The stories turn into lies and then there becomes a need to keep lying which eventually can become an automatic behavior.

Social Possibilities: Some children will make up stories because they want their peers to like them better. They will tell them about all of the great accomplishments they have done or all the cool things they are going to do. This need to impress their friends may be due to social

insecurities and not feeling comfortable enough with themselves for who they are. This leads them to make up stories about their lives.

What To Do When This Happens

- Get the child alone and discuss why you believe that he is making up stories.
- If the child gives you a good explanation, accept it, and talk to him about why you want him to tell the truth.
- Give the child an opportunity to write creative stories. In this way, he can channel his imagination into something constructive.
- Reward the child for honesty and for telling the truth.
- Explain to the child about establishing a reputation with others. Making up stories can be very detrimental to his future reputation and be harmful to making friends.
- Determine if the stories are harmful or if it is just a good imagination. If it is simply imagination, you may be able to ignore the behavior unless it gets out of hand.
- If the child denies making up stories, discuss the class rules for lying.
- If the stories persist to a point of lying, see this book for LYING.
- Contact the school psychologist if the making up of stories persists to a point where you believe the child either actually believes what he is saying or can not stop his behavior.
- Call the parents and discuss the situation with them. It may be important to see whether this problem only occurs in school or if it is a daily occurrence throughout the child's home and academic life.
- If the problem persists to the point where it is affecting the child's everyday functioning, his situation should be brought up to the Child Study Team in the school so that his situation is appropriately evaluated.