

Behavior Management Series

Issue #2

Why Children Have Low Activity Levels

Academic Possibilities: When children are failing at school, they become very nervous and anxious. Their inability to succeed creates a state of tension because they are not as good as everyone else. This anxiety and tension then becomes manifested as a low activity level because they have given up and no longer feel they can succeed.

Environmental Possibilities: There are times when children have families where everyone is a success. Because of this, the child feels the need to do great things. When the child can't do what he thinks the family wants or what he feels he needs to do to maintain status within the family, he learns to give up. Then, his activity level decreases. Also, some children live in homes where the activity level is very low. They see everyone in their families with very little, if any, motivation and drive. Unfortunately, this behavior is all they know. They then model the behavior from learned at home.

Intellectual Possibilities: Children with low levels of intelligence may have very low activity levels. Their intellectual ability prevents them from doing as well as other students. This can create a sense of failure on their part. Consequently, they begin to give up, creating after a while, lower energy levels.

Language Possibilities: Not applicable

Medical Possibilities: Children with certain biochemical problems may have lower energy levels because of a medical condition. Also, medications can create fatigue and drowsiness. The side effects may decrease energy level.

Perceptual Possibilities: Not applicable

Psychological Possibilities: One of the classic signs of depression is a very low activity level. When children are depressed, energy levels become very limited. Their feelings of sadness about certain issues create a state of learned helplessness whereby energy becomes depleted and drained. Also, when children feel uptight and nervous about things going on in their lives, it can create low activity levels. Psychologically, low activity levels can be a sign that a child is feeling unsure of himself, and it is being expressed in behavioral ways.

Social Possibilities: Some children have low levels of activity because they are not accepted by their peers or lack social skills which could give them positive reinforcement. They may want to fit in with the crowd but cannot seem to do so. They become socially isolated and withdraw from social activities. The energy they may have once had to be socially involved is no longer available.

What to Do When This Happens

- Meet with the school nurse to see if there are any conditions or factors (i.e. medication) that might be contributing to the child's low activity levels.
- Remember that a child with low activity levels may behave in this manner for some protective reason. Therefore, attempting to force him into a social situation will probably only create tremendous conflict, anxiety, and tension.
- Meet with the school psychologist to determine whether there are any extenuating circumstances for the low activity level (i.e. home issues, trauma, and previous academic failure).
- Understand that in order for a child to increase his activity level, he must feel comfortable and feel confident in the classroom. Confidence is a process that is built over a period of time and results from repeated successful experiences. The child with a low activity level needs a foundation of successful experiences as well as the appropriate social tools in order to be an active participant in the classroom.
- Meet with child on a one to one basis in a comfortable setting. Explain to the child that you are aware of the difficulty he has in both academic and/or social situations and that you want to help.
- Have the child work in groups so that the group energy creates excitement for him. Have the group work on some simple goal oriented task that will ensure success. This will give the child the feeling of unity and group accomplishment.
- Provide the student with many different types of small group activities so that he has the opportunity to work with all the members of his class. For instance, have the child work on a social studies project with one small group of children, and then work on a science project with a different small group.
- Keep in mind that you need to assign these groups and monitor the interactions to ensure protection and success.
- Speak with the school psychologist about having the child join a small group for social skills to increase activity levels. These types of controlled groups can help the child learn to interact and build skills in a safe and monitored environment.
- If necessary, discuss with the school psychologist about the possibility of setting up a behavior modification program for the child in the classroom so that reinforcement is delivered in an appropriate manner.
- 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 Children Are Verbally Aggressive

Academic Possibilities: Some children may lash out verbally at others due to poor academic performance. Their inability to succeed in school becomes overwhelming and they displace this frustration and feelings of inadequacy towards others through verbal aggression.

Environment Possibilities: Unfortunately, some children are verbally aggressive due to inappropriate modeling behavior on the part of their parents. They go home and see mom or dad being verbally aggressive towards each other and other family members. This is the only way they have learned about how to handle difficult situations. Consequently, it becomes a “monkey see, monkey do” type of approach to handling life’s difficult situations.

Intellectual Possibilities: Intelligence involves many verbal qualities. For those with below average intelligence, the ability to express their needs and wants in a socially appropriate manner is a problem. Consequently, they release their feelings through verbal aggression.

Language Possibilities: Children who are bilingual or have language difficulties may be very frustrated with school. Because they are lacking in language skills or just having difficulties with language processing, they become extremely upset. Often, they will not know how to deal with all of this tension, so that choose verbally abusive/harsh language to express their feelings.

Medical Possibilities: A child with a medical condition may feel as though life has treated him unfairly. He feels that he has been given “a raw deal” and decides that he will take out his anger and frustrations through verbal means.

Perceptual Possibilities: Perceptual problems can lead to great frustration in all areas of life. For some children, the only way they know how to handle their anger is to become verbally aggressive.

Psychological Possibilities: Some children have psychological problems which cause them to be very hostile and aggressive. Because of their “short fuse”, they have tendencies to scream at others as soon as something bothers them. Often, this is due to a lack of restraint and an inability to control their emotions.

Social Possibilities: Some children do not know “how to play with others.” They have to do things their way or no way at all. When they do not get their way, they become very upset and/or hostile. They then may express these feelings through verbal aggression.

What to Do When This Happens

- Remain calm and intervene immediately before the verbal aggressiveness escalates to a serious situation.
- Discuss the situation with the child and explain what is and is not appropriate in the classroom.
- Speak to the child about his impact upon others. Explain how his behavior is creating numerous problems not only for himself but for all others in the classroom.
- If necessary, contact the parents for an appointment about the child’s aggressive behavior.
- Go over the class rules with the child explaining why these rules are set.

- Explain the consequences of the child's behavior if this continues.
- Discuss with the school psychologist whether there are any underlying familial or emotional problems which the child is currently facing.
- Help the child to verbalize his feelings. Often children who are aggressive may have difficulties verbalizing what they are feeling and they then act out these frustrations through aggressive acts. Provide appropriate emotional labels that may identify what the child is feeling. Once children have the appropriate labels for their feelings they can communicate their frustration rather than act it out.
- Be sure to not put the child down in front of his classmates. This will only embarrass the child and keep him just as angry, if not angrier.
- If necessary, discuss with the school psychologist about the possibility of setting up a behavior modification program for the child in the classroom so that reinforcement is delivered in an appropriate manner.
- 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 Become Easily Angered, Annoyed or Upset

Academic Possibilities: Academic frustration and failure over a period of time will reduce a child's sense of self worth, confidence, and drain energy for patience and motivation. As a result, perspective is quickly lost when faced with a real or perceived academic failure situation and overreaction occurs.

Environmental Possibilities: Some children who come from homes where parents are over reactive, highly critical or easily agitated may exhibit this same behavior in school. They learn to deal with frustration in this manner and react to many situations with anger, annoyance or overreaction.

Intellectual Possibilities: Children with limited intellectual capacity may show these symptoms as a result of ongoing frustration due to their limitations.

Language Possibilities: Same as Academic

Medical Possibilities: Some children may become angry or easily annoyed due to a chemical imbalance. If there is a medical, neurological or organic problem, lower levels of tolerance than other children may be exhibited.

Perceptual Possibilities: Same as Academic

Psychological Possibilities: Children who are vulnerable as a result of a dysfunctional or abusive home may use anger or annoyance as a protective defense against the perceived possibility of criticism, rejection or devaluation. Expression of these emotions can indicate the presence of very low energy levels. These low energy levels may have been drained by high levels of tension resulting from serious emotional problems. Also, some children who exhibit these symptoms may be suffering from explosive personality disorders or oppositional defiant disorders.

Social Possibilities: Social fears, poor social skills or social rejection may cause a child to become angry, easily annoyed or upset. This type of social devaluation may reduce a child's sense of self worth and result in these reactions.

What to Do When This Happens

- Try to determine what exactly is angering the child. With many children, there is a specific event, task or other child which may be easily setting them off.
- Sit down with the child and discuss what you are seeing and have him explain to you why he is so easily angered.
- After listening to the child, do whatever you can to make the necessary changes in the classroom so that he can function more easily. (e.g.; (1) For example, try to seat the student at the front of the classroom so that you can keep a better eye on him. By being able to see his behaviors will give you a greater chance of preventing his anger from developing; (2) Have the student sit next to another student whom you know will not cause anger or hostility in him, etc.)

- Be sure, for your own safety and liability that you do not leave this student alone with other children. Be sure that supervision is constant.
- If the student cannot maintain self-control, remove the student from the environment. This must be done for the safety of the other children.
- Contact the parents to see if there is anything happening at home which is creating the anger in the child.
- Talk to the school psychologist about speaking with the child about developing better coping skills. Often, children who are easily angered or annoyed have poor coping skills and do not know how to control their emotions.
- Let the student know that if he feels his anger occurring that he does not have to participate in class activities at that moment. Come up with an acceptable way for him to deal with this situation, and create a signal he can give you when he feels the anger building.
- Talk to the school psychologist about the possibility of having the child in a group to work through his feelings.
- If necessary, discuss with the school psychologist about the possibility of setting up a behavior modification program for the child in the classroom so that reinforcement is delivered in an appropriate manner.
- 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 it can be appropriately evaluated.

Why Children Are Anxious

Academic Possibilities: Some children who lack academic success may feel a sense of anxiety. It starts when the child realizes that he cannot succeed the same way others do in school. Academic failure can create such a state of tension and anxiety because it plays a very important role in a child's everyday life. Given children are at school for at least 4-6 hours a day, academic failure can have a tremendous impact on a child's anxiety levels.

Environmental Possibilities: Children may be very anxious because they have homes where there are very serious problems. This may include neglect or abuse, a bitter divorce battle, etc. Also, in some cases, children may believe that their parents expect them to be perfect. Having to be the best at everything creates serious anxiety about failure.

Intellectual Possibilities: Sometimes, children with limited intelligence may be very anxious because they cannot do things as well nor as fast as everyone else. This can create a feeling of future embarrassment, thereby leading to anxiety.

Language Possibilities: Children with language difficulties may be very nervous and scared when they believe that they will have to speak in front of the class. Their problems with language can be quite anxiety provoking, and may subsequently withdraw altogether from participating with classmates for the fear of appearing foolish.

Medical Possibilities: In some cases, children have anxiety problems because of a biochemical imbalance. Also, side effects of certain medications may make children feel jittery and anxious.

Perceptual Possibilities: Children with perceptual difficulties may be very nervous and scared when they believe that they will have to read or write in front of the class. Their perceptual problems can be quite anxiety provoking and may withdraw altogether from participating with classmates for the fear of appearing foolish.

Psychological Possibilities: Inadequate emotional development brought on by parental rejection, lack of emotional involvement, and favoritism to another sibling, parental tension in the marriage, and so on, can result in a child becoming very anxious. The psychological state of anxiety can be caused from many factors. Almost always, whenever there is anxiety, psychological factors play a critical role in its cause.

Social Possibilities: Children may be anxious because they do not have any friends nor fit in with the crowd. They feel unaccepted by others and become anxious whenever they have to do anything with their peers.

What to Do When This Happens

- Remember that a child suffering from anxiety is feeling very unsure of himself and the situation. Therefore, attempting to force him into situations will only create tremendous conflict, anxiety, and tension.
- Meet with the school psychologist to determine whether there are any extenuating circumstances for the anxiety (i.e. home issues, trauma, and previous academic failure).

- Understand that a child going through anxiety must feel comfortable in the classroom. At times, this may be like coaxing a frightened turtle out of its shell. If you move too fast, he will revert back inside.
- Confidence is a process that is built over a period of time. The child with anxiety needs a foundation of successful experiences as well as the appropriate social tools in order to be an active participant in the classroom.
- Meet with child on a one to one basis in a comfortable setting. Explain to the child that you are aware of the difficulty he has and that you want to help.
- Have the child work in groups so that he can build confidence in the classroom. Have the group work on some simple goal oriented task that will ensure success. This will give the child the feeling of unity and group accomplishment.
- Provide the student with different types of small group activities so that he has the opportunity to work with all the members of his class. For instance, have the child work on a social studies project with one small group of children, and then work on a science project with a different small group.
- Keep in mind that you need to assign these groups and monitor the interactions to ensure protection and success.
- Speak with the school psychologist about having the child join a small group for social skills to increase his coping skills. These types of controlled groups can help the child learn to interact and build skills in a safe and monitored environment to overcome anxiety.
- If necessary, discuss the possibility of setting up a behavior modification program for the child in the classroom with the school psychologist so that reinforcement is delivered in an appropriate manner.
- 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 Children Exhibit Separation Anxiety

Academic Possibilities: Low academic performance may result in a child's hesitation in coming or remaining at school. In this case, avoidance of the possibility of failure may cause him to feel so anxious that he will refuse to leave home.

Environmental Possibilities: There are many home factors that may influence a child's transition and willingness to attend or remain at school. Ongoing parental tension, parental fears of separation, parental health issues or moving to a new community and school may contribute to such anxiety. Sometimes it may even be the parent who has difficulty separating from the child which gives the child mixed messages about independency.

Intellectual Possibilities: Limited intellectual ability may foster developmental immaturity. Consequently, such children are not ready to be separated with their parents.

Language Possibilities: Some children who come from bilingual backgrounds may be very frightened about entering a new situation like school where they are unsure of the language and reactions of others.

Medical Possibilities: If a child has a history of medical problems, where one or both of the parents have spent an excessive amount of time with him, he may feel vulnerable in school situations where he may feel alone.

Perceptual Possibilities: Not Applicable

Psychological Possibilities: There are many theories concerning the onset of separation anxiety. Possible reasons may involve immaturity, an unhealthy parent child bond that fosters dependency, low self esteem, prior trauma, fear of new situations, and general anxiety about being away from a protective environment.

Social Possibilities: Children who feel that they do not fit in or are different may not feel comfortable in social situations. Their only place of safety is at home. Because of their insecurities, they decide that they do not want to leave home because it is too frightening and anxiety provoking.

What to Do When This Happens

- Remember that a child suffering from separation anxiety may behave in this manner for some protective reason. Therefore, attempting to force him into situations will only create tremendous conflict, anxiety, and tension.
- Meet with the school psychologist to determine whether there are any extenuating circumstances for the separation anxiety (i.e. home issues, trauma, and previous academic failure).
- Understand that a child going through separation anxiety must feel comfortable in the classroom. At times, this may be like coaxing a frightened turtle out of its shell. If you move too fast, he will revert back inside.
- Confidence is a process that is built over a period of time. The child with separation anxiety needs a foundation of successful experiences as well as the appropriate social tools in order to be an active participant in the classroom.

- Meet with child on a one to one basis in a comfortable setting. Explain to the child that you are aware of the difficulty he has separating from his parents and that you want to help.
- Have the child work in groups so that he can build confidence in the classroom. Have the group work on some simple goal oriented task that will ensure success. This will give him the feeling of unity and group accomplishment.
- Provide the student with different types of small group activities so that he has the opportunity to work with all the members of his class. For instance, have the child work on a social studies project with one small group of children, and then work on a science project with a different small group.
- Keep in mind that you need to assign these groups and monitor the interactions to ensure protection and success.
- Speak with the school psychologist about having the child join a small group for social skills to increase his coping skills. These types of controlled groups can help him learn to interact and build skills in a safe and monitored environment to overcome separation anxiety.
- If necessary, discuss with the school psychologist about the possibility of setting up a behavior modification program for the child in the classroom so that reinforcement is delivered in an appropriate manner.
- 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.