

Behavior Management Series - Issue#3

Why Children Are Argumentative

Academic Possibilities: Some children who lack academic success may feel a sense of stress. This tension continues as they realize that they cannot succeed the same way others do in school. Academic failure then becomes problematic, and these children decide to take a stance of anger, and may “argue” about the need, amount, purpose and importance of what is required.

Environmental Possibilities: Children may be argumentative because they see this behavior exhibited at home. They may see their mom and dad fighting a lot, and thereby model this behavior. Another possibility is that because a child may be afraid of his parents, he decides to take an argumentative stance with other authority figures because of an inability to do so at home.

Intellectual Possibilities: Sometimes, children with limited intelligence may be very argumentative because they cannot do things as well or as fast as everyone else. This can create a feeling of potential embarrassment and insecurity. More often than not, by taking an argumentative approach, these children are simply masking their feelings of insecurity behind an expression of anger.

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 they may act on these feelings by taking an argumentative stance. By constantly arguing with the teacher, the child is actually just trying to avoid being involved in doing something that he does not want to do.

Medical Possibilities: Not Applicable

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 become argumentative to avoid having to do their participatory class work.

Psychological Possibilities: Some children may be very argumentative because they are suffering from low self-esteem. Insecure feelings about one’s ability can create a sense of tension and anxiety. The child does not know any other way deal with the conflict of how to handle

his/her fears than by being argumentative. In actuality, this approach is only masking doubts and fears.

Social Possibilities: Children may be argumentative because they want to be the leaders of a social group. Furthermore, some children do not take well to criticism by their peers. They will argue over everything if they do not get what they want or hear what they want to hear.

What to Do When This Happens

- Remain calm and intervene immediately before the argumentative stance of the child escalates to a serious situation
 - Discuss the situation with the child and explain what is and is not appropriate in the classroom. 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.
 - Sometimes children who are argumentative are fighting off feelings of insignificance. In this case, place the student in a position of leadership for some group activity that occurs in school. This places an emphasis on group responsibility and provides the child with a significant feeling of empowerment.
 - 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. 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 this frustration through aggressive acts.
 - If necessary, contact the parents for an appointment about the child's argumentative approach to handling issues.
 - 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.
 - 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.
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Why Children Need to Be the Center Of Attention

Academic Possibilities: Some children with problems in academics feel the need to try and get all of the attention from the teacher. They try to be the center of attention so that they can get some form of recognition by either the teacher or the students because they are not succeeding in their school work. In their eyes, maybe being the center of attention will compensate for inadequacies in school work.

Environmental Possibilities: Some children do not get much attention at home and their need for reinforcement is very high. They take this need into the classroom and try to become the center of attention. Also, some children may have always experienced being the center of attention home. Because of this, they expect to be the center of attention at school. This can be common in children who are the only child in the family where they get 100% of their parents' attention.

Intellectual Possibilities: Some children with low intellectual abilities try to compensate by being the center of attention. They may feel the need to get extra attention to show that they are trying or attempting to get recognition. Also, children with high intellectual ability may want to be the center of attention because they know all of the answers and want to be recognized for their intelligence.

Language Possibilities: Some children have very strong verbal abilities. They are able to speak quite clearly and with some eloquence, even for a child. When they realize this, they begin to want to be the center of attention because of the praise and accolades which may come along with it.

Medical Possibilities: Children with medical problems may feel the need to be the center of attention simply due to the fact that they may feel vulnerable and need more attention to feel safe and function in the classroom. The problem becomes more serious when these children start to demand all of the attention even when they do not need it.

Perceptual Possibilities: Children with perceptual difficulties may want to be the center of attention because they do not see the world as others do. They may actually not be able to process the fact that they are receiving attention since they may distort social cues.

Psychological Possibilities: Children who always need to be the center of attention may have problems with self-esteem and self-confidence. It may stem from insecurities regarding abilities in some areas of life. Being the center of attention is a way to try and gain recognition for some unfulfilled feelings that they may be currently experiencing. Also, children who always need to be the center of attention are frequently fighting off the feelings of insignificance. They believe that as long as they have the "spotlight," they are seen as important.

Social Possibilities: There are children who need to be the center of attention simply because they absolutely love it. The fact is, being the center of attention can make someone very popular if he can do it without being annoying. For example, becoming school president or a class leader allows a child great social status and earns him the desired center of attention.

What to Do When This Happens

- You should always keep in mind that a child who needs to be the center of attention may be sending a message. This means that the child's real motive for his behavior is not actually defined but is being indirectly communicated through attention seeking behavior.
 - Meet with the school psychologist to see if there are any extenuating circumstances that might be creating this pattern of inappropriate behavior.
 - In order to deal with this pattern, you must understand the different sides that are working at the same time. First, the child's need for attention is not the problem. Problems may arise for peers and the teacher in the child's choice of behaviors to derive attention. Therefore, you will need to see the need for attention as a symptom of a larger problem.
 - Provide the child with controlled attention when he least expects it. For example, go over to him when not expected, call him up to your desk for reassurance or observation of a positive behavior when not expected, and then let him know at the end of the day the things that you found to be most positive.
 - Meet with the child individually and preempt the inappropriate behavior. This means that you need to tell the child before he enters the room in the morning that you will not allow him to act in this manner in the classroom any longer, and, there will be serious consequences if the rules are not followed. These consequences should be determined prior to discussing this situation with the child.
 - Children who are not able to handle the above factors/suggestions may be involved in a much more serious problem than at first thought. 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.
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Why Children Need Immediate Attention

Academic Possibilities: Sometimes children who have academic problems may not know how to delay or wait for the teacher. They may be so insecure about their academic abilities that they feel the only way to keep pace is to get immediate attention for the problem they are dealing with at that time.

Environmental Possibilities: The need for immediate attention may be the result of a lack of nurturance or a deprived level of attention at home. It can also be the result of panic behavior brought on by abuse, neglect or uninvolved parents.

Intellectual Possibilities: Children with low intellectual ability may lack the social maturity of social awareness. They may compensate for their feelings of inadequacy by a constant need for reassurance.

Language Possibilities: Same motive as Intellectual

Medical Possibilities: Some children with medical problems may need immediate attention due to physical problems or limitations. A child with a physical disability may not be able to wait until the teacher has time to help. For example, a child in a wheel chair may need immediate attention if he has to go to the bathroom or needs to reach something, etc.

Perceptual Possibilities: Same motive as Intellectual

Psychological Possibilities: Since the need for attention may not be fulfilled by significant individuals in a child's life, it creates an anxious state for the child who then must seek out this need through any means possible. The anxiety caused by the deprivation becomes like a starving man who impulsively acts without thought of consequence. His only goal is to reduce the tension, thereby acting intrusively or always needing the spotlight. Without the spotlight, the child feels insignificant.

Social Possibilities: Social insecurities heightened at certain stages of development might cause children to demand or seek constant attention from peers. This need for excessive attention is brought on by a fear of rejection or perception of insignificance from peers. The anxiety brought on by this perception causes some children to seek constant reassurance from peers. However, it usually angers others, causing real avoidance and rejection. This in turn heightens the anxiety of the child, who goes back and seeks more reassurance, creating a vicious cycle of rejection.

What to Do When This Happens

- Say, in a firm but compassionate tone of voice, “Please wait, I’ll be with you as soon as I can”.
 - If this occurring with many children in the class, have a lesson about keeping a safe and cooperative environment. This lesson should stress taking turns, sharing, and patience.
 - Explain that everyone in the class is very important and that although you would like to help everyone, you only have 2 hands. Therefore, we have to learn to be more independent.
 - Discuss this situation with the school psychologist. The child may have low self-esteem and may benefit from individual or group therapy.
 - Contact the parents if the problem gets serious. Maybe there is some underlying reason why the child needs such immediate attention due to a familial problem.
 - 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.
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Why Children Can't Attend To a Task

Academic: Many children have great difficulty attending to a task when it is boring for them. Their total disinterest in the academic subject being taught leads to an inability to attend. Also, children with limited skills become easily distracted, daydream, and procrastinate to possibly avoid making mistakes.

Environmental: Some children cannot attend to a task because they have learned that this behavior is acceptable. Their home life may involve constant disorganization and limited structure. At home they may be allowed to start certain things and not finish them without consequence or support. This pattern of behavior carries over into all aspects of life whereby their attention span becomes quite limited because they have never been taught that life involves paying attention to things we like and don't like.

Intellectual: For some children, limited intelligence can hinder an ability to attend to a task. Also, those children with very high intelligence (e.g.; the gifted child) may also have great difficulty staying on task in school because they become rapidly bored in a classroom designed for average children.

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 become increasingly frustrated and give up. This leads to inattention to what everyone is doing, creating a lack of attention to the particular task at hand.

Medical: There are many different theories to what causes inattention. One of these theories is that it is a biological and neurological problem. Attention deficit/hyperactive disorder (AD/HD) may be one significant reason for a consistent lack of attention and focus to task.

Perceptual: When children see the world differently from others, there can be a great frustration in trying to complete class work. Attempting to handle academic work but consistently not being able to succeed becomes a great problem for them. After a while, the frustrations can become overwhelming thereby leading to an inability to focus on anything, because even when focused, there is no success.

Psychological: In many cases, the inability to focus on a task results from very high levels of tension. This tension which drains away energy limits the amount of available energy required for concentration and focus.

Social: Some children cannot stay on task because they are completely wrapped up in their social lives and social issues. They do not 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, leaving no energy to focus on school work.

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 with focusing on tasks.
 - Try to reduce the amount auditory or visual stimuli in the classroom so 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 is having difficulty staying on task.
 - 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 can not 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.
 - Put the child in the front of the class so that he will have a greater chance of staying on task and not being distracted by the other stimuli within the room.
 - Increase the number of hands on tasks rather than straight academic work. This type of work will keep the child busy.
 - Try to incorporate more visuals within the classroom.
 - Learn to be more flexible. Being too rigid with a student with a short attention span will only create conflict, anxiety, and tension on both you and the child's part.
 - 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.
 - Offer the student extra help before or after school to deal with the attention problem.
 - 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.
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Why Children Have Short Attention Spans

Academic: Some children who are very bright have short attention spans when academics subjects are boring for them. Their total disinterest in the academic subject being taught leads to an inability to attend. Children with limited skill development may also have short attention spans because they become easily frustrated and give up.

Environmental: Children who are exposed to serious environmental dysfunction or abuse will carry these issues to school and become preoccupied or self absorbed during the school day, thereby reducing their ability to concentrate on a task.

Intellectual: For some children, limited intelligence can create a short attention span. Also, those children with very high intelligence (e.g.; the gifted child) may also have great difficulty paying attention in school because they become rapidly bored in a classroom designed for average children.

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 become rapidly frustrated and give up. This leads to shorter attention span as time progresses because their drive and desire to succeed diminishes.

Medical: There are many different theories to what causes inattention. One of these theories is that it is a biological and neurological problem. Attention deficit/hyperactive disorder (AD/HD) may be one significant reason for a consistent lack of attention and focus to task.

Perceptual: When children see the world differently from others, there can be a great frustration in trying to complete class work. Attempting to handle academic work but consistently not being able to succeed becomes a great problem for them. After a while, the frustrations can become overwhelming thereby leading to an inability to focus on anything, because even when focused, there is no success. Also, a short attention span may be a signal of a serious processing disorder that limits the child's ability to process information as quickly or successfully as his classmates.

Psychological: In many cases, the inability to focus on a task results from very high levels of tension. This tension which drains away energy limits the amount of available energy required for concentration and focus. Also, children who are depressed and lack energy will also be limited in their ability to maintain a focus for any period of time.

Social: Some children have short attention spans because they are completely wrapped up in their social lives and social issues. They do not 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, leaving little energy to focus attention on school work.

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 with attention span.
- Try to reduce the amount auditory or visual stimuli in the classroom so that the child does not have too many things to focus on at one time.
- Talk with the child about why you feel he has such a short attention span. Ask him why he is having so much trouble focusing for long periods of time. If he is able to verbalize his issues this can save everyone a great deal of time.
- Reinforce the student with verbal praise when you notice him paying attention. Even if it is for a brief period of time, this will help build confidence.
- Try to get involved with what the student is doing when he has to pay attention. By interacting with him, you 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 can not 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.
- Put the child in the front of the class so that he will have a greater chance of staying on task and not being distracted by the other stimuli within the room.
- Increase the number of hands on tasks rather than straight academic work. This type of work will keep the child busy.
- Try to incorporate more visuals within the classroom.
- Learn to be more flexible. Being too rigid with a student with a short attention span will only create conflict, anxiety, and tension on both you and the child's part.
- 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.
- Offer the student extra help before or after school to deal with the attention problem.
- 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.
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