



Behavior Management Series –Issue #8

Why Children Are Controlling

Academic Possibilities: Some children who do poorly in school may be very controlling in an attempt to gain status that is lost by their academic failure.

Environmental Possibilities: Children may be very controlling as a result of ineffective parenting skills. In this case, very few if any limits or boundaries are set by the parents or they may pave every road so that the child does not become frustrated. Such parents are usually afraid of not being able to handle the child or be effective parents, so they give the child everything and demand nothing from him/her. Also, since parents in this case are not offering boundaries or a “buffer” from the outside world, the child, out of panic, seeks control to ward off his fears of something happening. In this case, the child leads the parents and faces the world without a sense of protection. The parents will use all sorts of rationalizations for their lack of supervision or consequences for the child’s behavior but the underlying fear here is to prevent them from seeing how ineffective they are as parents.

Other children may be very controlling since they themselves are overly controlled at home. Children who experience very tight boundaries, rigid parenting skills, overreactions and so on may model this or take it out on other children. This sense of control over others may make them feel less victimized.

Intellectual Possibilities: Same as Academic Possibilities

Language Possibilities: Same as Academic Possibilities

Medical Possibilities: Sometimes children who are experiencing medical concerns may be controlling because of their fears and inability to control their medical situation which creates a sense of vulnerability. To ward off the anxiety associated with this vulnerability and feelings of things being out of their control, children will often become controlling.

Perceptual Possibilities: Some children with perceptual deficits may be controlling because of an inability to process information that may allow him to maintain a proper perspective. Often, he may misread a situation, misinterpret another child’s actions or gestures or miss the social subtleties that are required to act properly.

Psychological Possibilities: Children who need to always be in control may be doing so as a result of intense fear, panic or anxiety. The more controlling a child is the more out of control

he/she actually feels. Children who are always controlling are letting us know that they are really in a state of panic.

Controlling people, situations, things etc. allows them to feel less out of control. In this way, they try to make their lives predictable and manageable. However, life is not like this and one needs to “bend in the wind” to survive. Therefore, when things become more overwhelming or out of hand, the child needs to exert more control. When people or situations do not conform to the child’s need to control, a panic state ensues which may be characterized by tantrums, cursing, yelling, and so on. These behaviors are the true indication of how out of control the child actually feels.

Social Possibilities: Children may be controlling in an attempt to be noticed by others. Some children who feel socially insignificant may think that controlling others will provide them with a social audience. However, many children soon reject this individual because he is so controlling, which makes him more anxious and therefore increases his need to control.

What to Do When This Happens

- The approach suggested here has three parts. The first is to set boundaries around the inappropriate behavior, the second is to sit with the child and find out what the need is to control others and the third part is helping the child change behavior patterns.
- The first part includes sitting with the child alone with no other students around. Keeping in mind that the need to control is not a sign of strength, but a sign of a fragile ego, do not hesitate establishing yourself as the benevolent authority.
- While you understand that he may have issues that cause him to act this way, and you will help him try to understand them, you should inform him that you will not tolerate this behavior.
- Discuss the seriousness of the situation, and the consequences if it continues.
- For the second part you may want to try to help the child understand the reasons why he is being controlling. Try to get him to verbalize what he is feeling or why he does what he does. If he is unable to verbalize or label his feelings you may want to provide him with some labels for what he may be feeling. For example, you may want to say that in the past you have noticed that other children who need to control have done so because they feel they are not doing well in school, have problems at home or feel rejected by other students.
- If this is a consistent pattern of behavior on the part of any student, talk to the school psychologist about setting up a meeting with the parent(s). This will provide the parents with what has been happening in the classroom, provide you with getting feedback on issues at home that may be contributing to the situation, and offer parents specific parenting skills which may help all involved.
- Develop a behavioral contract explaining what is expected of this student in the classroom with rewards and punishments for either following or not following through. This contract is something a school psychologist should be well trained in developing.
- 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 Critical Of Others

Academic Possibilities: Children who feel insecure about their academic weaknesses may at times attempt to devalue those more competent through criticism. In doing so, the child feels less inadequate since he rationalizes that others also have problems.

Environmental Possibilities: The old saying “we live what we learn” may be applicable here especially if the child is exposed to a great deal of criticism at home. This pecking order occurs when the child goes to school and finds someone to be a victim like he is at home. Further, extreme tension generated from home problems may be vented by some children in this overt manner. The child’s anger, which develops from frustration is often misdirected in this fashion. Criticism of others relieves the child’s frustrations. This is usually done without awareness of consequences since relieving tension in this manner is usually impulsive without awareness of consequence.

Intellectual Possibilities: Some children with limited intellectual abilities may also be critical of others in an attempt to increase their status, which they feel is very low.

Language Possibilities: Same as Academic Possibilities

Medical Possibilities: Not Applicable

Perceptual Possibilities: Some children with perceptual difficulties may at times misperceive or misread the actions of others. As a result, these children may feel threatened and become critical as a defense against what they believe they perceive.

Psychological Possibilities: Children who feel very vulnerable or inadequate may resort to criticism as a method of getting people to back off. They will do this out of fear of the person learning too much about them or seeing the faults that they believe they see in themselves.

Social Possibilities: Children may resort to criticism of others in an attempt to devalue the social status of another more popular. The hope here is that devaluing someone more popular makes the child feel less inadequate. Other children may become critical of others who may not be paying attention to them.

What to Do When This Happens

- Sit down with the child in a private session with no other students around and discuss what you have been noticing about the child’s behavior.
- Ask the child his opinion of the behavior to see what his perspective is.
- Determine whether or not the child realizes what he is doing. Some children will have a thin layer of denial and when confronted will own up to the behavior. If this is the case, the situation may be more workable. However, other children may have a deeper level of denial and in that case do not push for insight or admission and discuss this with the school psychologist since this deep denial may be covering a more fragile ego.

- Assuming the child understands what he is doing but is not sure how to change it, explain to him the reasons why his behavior is detrimental to making friends and succeeding in school. The child needs to become aware of how his behavior affects others.
 - Try to offer the child ideas, options, and alternatives, about what to do when he feels he needs to criticize others. For instance, have the child sit closer to you in the classroom so that he may feel more secure and connected. Also, let the child know that if he needs to criticize others he may want to come to you first and discuss his motives.
 - Try to find out specific patterns where this behavior is used by the child. There may be a theme to the issues, experiences or situations in which the behavior occurs since criticizing others is an attempt to refocus the “spotlight”, especially in situations where the child feels inadequate.
 - Verbally praise the student when you notice a time when criticism 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 which may be the reasoning why the child is criticizing others.
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Why Children Are Critical Of Themselves

Academic Possibilities: Consistent academic failure may frustrate a child to the point where he beats himself up. Some children may exhibit this briefly out of frustration or disgust if they fail a test, forget an assignment and so on. The issue here is always the intensity and frequency and the level of functional impairment (the degree to which the symptom interferes in the child’s ability to function) that occurs as a result of these beliefs.

Environmental Possibilities: Children who come from homes that employ a highly demanding or critical parenting style may exhibit this behavior pattern. In this case, they are either modeling what they believe their parents feel about them or get angry at themselves for their inability to please their parents with its associated fear of disappointment. Some children may be critical of themselves because they feel they cannot live up to the expectations of the parents. Another reason may be the inadequacy brought on by the exceptional achievements of a sibling with whom he may not feel equal.

Intellectual Possibilities: Low intellectual ability may result in continuous frustration and failure. This consistency may lead the child to believe that he is inadequate thereby resulting in self criticism.

Language Possibilities: Same as Perceptual Possibilities

Medical Possibilities: Not Applicable

Perceptual Possibilities: Perceptual frustration in spite of intellectual ability can result in a child taking out certain feelings on him/herself. The difficulty in being capable but not being able to process information quickly can be very frustrating. Since all frustration eventually turns to anger, it sometimes gets turned on the individual, rather than outward towards others.

Psychological Possibilities: Self derogatory statements may be exhibited for several reasons. Some children voice such statements for reassurance or attention. Other children who truly believe the statements may be communicating intense frustration and a cry for help. Other children who have low self esteems may use such statements in an effort to soften the fear of failure that they perceive frequently occurs. Verbally beating up oneself before you believe someone else will as a result of a failure or mistake, may be the motive in this case. Other children may use this technique as a means of gaining sympathy and attention, especially if surrounded by individuals who tend to enable or rescue.

Social Possibilities: Consistent social rejection, embarrassment, victimization or isolation may result in a child making self derogatory statements. His belief that he is socially “worthless” may be too difficult to tolerate. Also, some children may resort to this behavior to gain a social spotlight, even though a negative one. Any spotlight is better than none.

What to Do When This Happens

- Have a 1 to 1 conversation with the child to discuss how the child is doing and how he feels about himself.
 - Give the child tasks which you know he can excel. In the process, boost the child’s academic self-confidence so that future learning is something he wants to take part in. In this case, you may want to present the child with a series of tasks that ensure 100% success. Since confidence is a result of repeated successful experiences, this foundation is crucial if one is going to feel adequate. Ensuring 100% success may be derived by shorter but more frequent assignments, less demanding problems, other means of responding to a task i.e. audiotapes, charts, a daily progress report that focuses on the positives, and classroom tasks that ensure 100% success but also place the child in a positive light with his classmates i.e. collecting papers, handing out papers, leading the class to a special.
 - Have a class lecture on feelings and emotions and how it is important to discuss why you should talk about how you feel to those who care about you.
 - Provide all forms of positive reinforcement to the child. These techniques can be gotten from the school psychologist or other teachers within your school.
 - Contact the school psychologist about the possibility of having a the child in a group to help promote self-esteem.
 - Contact the parents to see if anything recent at home has greatly affected the child’s self-esteem.
 - 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 Are Distractible

Academic Possibilities: There are some children who have great difficulty focusing on more than one academic task. Given more than one thing to do, these children will often get caught up in their own distractibility. When not fully structured, they cannot stay on task because too many academic demands are being placed on them at one time.

Environmental Possibilities: Children may become distractible if the environment in which they are situated has too many extraneous stimuli. For example, if a child is trying to do his homework but the TV is on, siblings are fighting, Mom is calling him and Dad is on the telephone, the child will never be able to get the work done which is required because of the numerous distractions. For some children, distractibility may be a symptom of preoccupation with family issues. Issues like fighting between parents, financial problems, drinking or violence etc. may cause a child to become very tense and preoccupied, thereby limiting his ability to focus.

Intellectual Possibilities: Same motive as Psychological

Language Possibilities: Same as Psychological

Medical Possibilities: Perhaps the most common reason educators talk about today is attention deficit disorder (ADD). Children with ADD will be distractible and easily influenced by extraneous stimuli. Although we do not know why ADD occurs, there is evidence to suggest that these children have great difficulty focusing on the task at hand or following through with directions.

Perceptual Possibilities: Limited focus and attention can be the result of a processing disorder which slows down the child's ability to understand and process information. As a result they lose interest easily and become more distracted.

Psychological Possibilities: Psychological reasons for distractibility are numerous. Increased tension, preoccupation, low self esteem, feelings of inadequacy, depression is just a few of the causes of limited focus in school.

Social Possibilities: Socially, some children cannot do or handle more than one thing at a time. In many life events, there are two or more activities occurring at the same time. Some children cannot handle this. Because of all the social stimulation, they become easily distractible and are then unable to focus on the task at which they are supposed to be doing at that time.

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 distractibility.
- 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 distractible and what things may be contributing to his distractibility.
- 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - If necessary, discuss with the school psychologist about the possibility of setting up a behavior modification program or a contract system 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 Make Excuses

Academic Possibilities: Excuses for not doing homework, not finishing classwork, forgetting books etc. are very common for children who are experiencing serious learning problems especially if these avoidance behaviors are a pattern. Other avoidance symptoms or excuses may include selective forgetting (characterized by a selectivity of the forgetfulness usually centering around areas of learning that may be creating frustration), forgetting to write down assignments day after day, taking hours to complete homework, not being able to get started with classwork,, frequently bringing home unfinished class work, consistently leaving long term assignments until the last minute, and frequent complaints of headaches or stomachaches before school. If such avoidance excuses occur, the teacher can determine the seriousness of the problem by the following criteria:

- *FREQUENCY OF SYMPTOMS* - Consider how often the symptoms occur. In this case, the greater the frequency of the symptom, the greater chance of a serious problem
- *DURATION OF SYMPTOMS* - Consider how long the symptoms last. In this case, the longer the duration of the symptom, the more serious the problem .
- *INTENSITY OF SYMPTOMS* - Consider how serious the reactions are at the time of occurrence. In this case, the more intense the symptom, the more serious the problem.

Environmental Possibilities: Some children may use excuses to avoid parental reaction especially in homes where excessive corporal punishment may be used. At other times, children may use excuses to prevent a loss of family status or feelings of disappointment on the part of parents.

Intellectual Possibilities: Excuses may be a means of coping and surviving for children with limited ability who want to avoid peer reaction or embarrassment.

Language Possibilities: Same as Perceptual Possibilities

Medical Possibilities: Not Applicable

Perceptual Possibilities: Some children with perceptual deficits may not be able to process information as quickly as others and as a result may resort to excuses to cover up inadequacies.

Psychological Possibilities: Excuses in children are common when their energy levels are low due to a drain caused by serious problems, conflicts, fears and so on. Since they have very little available energy, what remains is used for creative avoidance. When children use illogical logic in their excuses, it is a sign to be concerned. Illogical logic occurs when the obvious excuse is so illogical, but to the child it very logical. This self deception is very common in anxiety driven children (those with extremely high levels of tension which drive impulsive behavior). Other children may use excuses frequently, which is nothing more than lying. This pattern of lying may reflect a pathology that is deeply ingrained and may indicate a more serious pattern that needs to be discussed with the school psychologist.

Social Possibilities: Children who may fear social ridicule, rejection or loss of status may resort to excuses which in their minds maintain their social position.

What to Do When This Happens

- All children make excuses. As long as it does not happen frequently, it is something that should be expected. However, excuses can be problematic if they result in lying. Therefore, we will treat a child's making excuses as an avoidance pattern which may include lying.
- Before taking any action, obtain all the information about the situation at hand. You do not want to jump to any conclusions or make false accusations without being at least reasonably sure that what has occurred constitutes an unfounded excuse.
- If you believe that the child has lied, do not address the situation in front of any other child or adult. This will avoid embarrassing the child. If you do it in front of anyone, you increase the chances of the child continuing to lie because he will not want to be "publicly humiliated".
- If you are reasonably sure that lying has taken place, do not use entrapment. This means that you do not try to trick the student into admitting what he has said.
- Be very diplomatic and direct in confronting the child with what you know to be the facts. Explain the situation in a clear, convincing, and straight forward approach without any form of yelling or screaming. Be firm in what you say and show the student that you are serious.
- After explaining your point of view, ask the child if he now wants to rethink what was said. Don't put him on the spot at that moment if he says nothing in response. Tell him

that “We will talk about this again sometime today when you are ready but we will definitely talk about it today.”

- If the child admits to having made a false excuse, say that you appreciate the honesty, and then tell him what the consequences of the behavior will be. This should be something already determined by you, and “the punishment should fit the crime.”
- Finally, if the child does not admit to lying, you must then act as if it were true, based on the overwhelming evidence, and enforce the consequences. Tell the child in this case that the evidence indicates that lying did take place and that class rules have been violated.