



Behavior Management Series –Issue #9

Why Children Fail Tests

Academic Possibilities: The most common reason for failing tests revolve around either a lack of understanding of the concept or poor or nonexistent study skills.

Environmental Possibilities: Children who come from dysfunctional or chaotic homes may not have the luxury of quiet, or a space to study. Others may be overwhelmed with responsibilities given to them by parents i.e. baby-sitting younger children.

Intellectual Possibilities: Children with limited intellectual ability may just give up if the test questions are too difficult.

Language Possibilities: Children with language processing problems may have a very difficult time processing directions, questions or organizing and expressing essay responses.

Medical Possibilities: Children who miss a great deal of school as a result of medical problems may be unprepared for tests.

Perceptual Possibilities: Same as Language Possibilities

Psychological Possibilities: Some children who are angry at their parents may use academic failure as a means of revenge, especially if those parents place a high regard on academics. Other children who are oppositional may fail tests as a message that they can do whatever they want, regardless of the consequences.

Social Possibilities: Social preoccupation may interfere with a child's motivation or available time to study for tests. For some children, academic status may go against the "rules" of the social group desired. As a result, a lack of achievement may be a conscious decision motivated by need of acceptance. Other children may not provide themselves with an appropriate balance between academics and social involvement.

What to Do When This Happens

- Set up a meeting with the school psychologist to discuss all possible reasons why the student may be failing his tests.
- Review student records including past teacher comments for similar types of symptoms exhibited by the child in earlier grades. If this is found, the problem may be more serious.

Also, it would be very helpful to talk to the student's prior teachers to get feedback on what they tried that worked and did not work, since you do not want to repeat something that proved ineffective in the past.

- Review past report cards looking for consistent difficulties in certain subject areas. Sometimes, children with serious learning problems or learning disabilities will show patterns of academic failure over a long period of time.
 - Review the child's group achievement test scores which may give you some idea of skill levels. However, be aware that since it is a group administered test, some children with serious learning problems may not have taken it seriously.
 - If available, review the child's IQ scores which may offer insight into the child's overall intellectual ability. If you believe the child is working to his capabilities, has an average to above average IQ, and yet is still failing in school, this warrants immediate attention.
 - Meet with the school nurse to review the child's medical records for any medical reason that might be contributing to test failure. Ask about hearing and eyesight and whether or not the child is on any medications.
 - Finally, refer this child to the Child Study Team in your school for further discussion, especially if you have found patterns in your review of the child's records. Referring a child who is failing tests to the child study team should never be looked at as a reflection of your teaching ability.
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Why Children Cannot Handle Constructive Criticism

Academic Possibilities: There are some children who believe that they are always right when it comes to their school work. Because of their academic success, they feel as though they are right in everything. Sometimes, when these children are told that something is not correct with the way they are doing math or science, they can become extremely defensive. In the process, they take the criticism as negativity rather than taking it as constructive. Also, some children may have had negative school experiences with teachers in the past that may have been perceived by the child as too critical. Academically, these children now are very afraid of criticism because they cannot take it constructively.

Environmental Possibilities: At home, some children only hear negative words and criticism about what they do. Nothing is ever positive. Consequently, they become extremely protective of themselves when it comes to doing anything. When they are then given constructive criticism about their work, they immediately put up a wall and do not react appropriately, based on personal and home experiences.

Intellectual Possibilities: A child with limited intelligence may not be able to do things as fast or as well as others. He may become very sensitive to criticism because of his inability to succeed.

Language Possibilities: Children who feel insecure about their expressive language ability may become very defensive and lose perspective when someone focuses or suggests something they need to do to improve their language skills.

Medical Possibilities: Not Applicable

Perceptual Possibilities: Same as Language Possibilities

Psychological Possibilities: Many children have low self-esteem and fragile egos. When this occurs, the ego is not strong enough to maintain a proper perspective on things. As a result, a distortion of what is really being said is common. They can be very sensitive and take everything quite personally. When these children are given constructive criticism they often take it quite hard. They believe that criticism is a reflection on them as children rather than about the work which is being constructively criticized.

Social Possibilities: There are certain times when kids will act out because of what their friends are doing. If children are constructively criticized in front of friends, they may react very defensively. They do not want to be told they are doing something wrong in front of their peers. This could lead to teasing or ridicule. Therefore, because of their social need for acceptance, they react to the criticism in a very negative manner.

What to Do When This Happens

- Have a 1 to 1 conversation with the child to discuss how he is doing and feels about himself. Explain to the child that you only want to help him do better in school. When you suggest something he needs to see it as a “constructive suggestion that will improve his work”, not a negative criticism of his ability.
- You may also want to discuss with the child how you hope to make him feel better. Since confidence is a result of repeated successful experiences, this foundation is crucial if one is going to feel adequate. Keeping in mind that a confident ego keeps things in better perspective, and repeated successful experiences bolster an ego, the first step is to empower the child into believing he is capable and adequate.
- Give the child tasks which you know he can excel at. In the process, boost the child’s academic self-confidence so that future learning is something he wants to take part in. In order to accomplish this, you may want to present the child with a series of tasks that ensure 100% success. 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.
- Provide all forms of positive reinforcement to the child i.e. compliments, smiles, stickers, gold stars, smiley face stickers/stamps.
- 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 perception of himself.
- 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 Cry Easily

Academic Possibilities: For some children, the ultimate form of self-worth lies in academic grades. When they succeed at school they are “good kids”, and when they do poorly “, they are “bad kids”. This type of pressure can be overwhelming. Given the personal value grades play in these children’s lives, when they fail in school, they cannot deal with the emotional devastation that it brings. Consequently, they react in the only fashion they know how, by crying.

Environmental Possibilities: Some children live in homes where crying is the norm. They see a family member get upset very easily and he is immediately comforted by all those around him. Children can pick up on this behavior and learn that their crying can also bring them attention. By crying, everyone reacts to them at that time. Therefore, even if the problem is not that bad, crying will surely get the attention desired. Other possibilities may include continued stress caused by family issues i.e. separation, constant arguing, domestic and child violence which diminishes the child’s energy levels resulting in poor coping skills.

Intellectual Possibilities: Same motive as Language, Perceptual, and Psychological

Language Possibilities: Not being able to express oneself can be tremendously frustrating for children. Because of this, when they become upset, they may not be able to put into words how much they are hurting. Since the language ability is problematic, they resort to a natural human emotion of crying.

Medical Possibilities: Some children may be physically sensitive or medically fragile. If someone hits them softly or bumps into them it causes them much “physical pain”. This hypersensitivity can lead to the children immediately crying because of the pain.

Perceptual Possibilities: Imagine not seeing the world in which everyone else does. Think about what it would feel like if everyone in the class saw one thing but you just could not perceive it. Your vision was fine but you could not make out what it was everyone could see. This is what children with perceptual problems experience daily. After a while, their frustrations build to a point where they just cry because of all of the hurt and frustration.

Psychological Possibilities: Some children are hypersensitive and may cry for various reasons. For example, they may have a low self-concept and take everything people say much too personally. Also, some children cannot verbalize their true feelings, so the only manner in which they know how to respond or release tension is to do what comes naturally and that is to cry. Sometimes crying as an initial reaction may be a fear of being hit, or chastised, and the use of crying is done in hopes that the individual feels “sorry” for the child.

Social Possibilities: Some children may cry easily because they do not fit in social situations. They are outcasts and really do not know why. They become hurt and socially frustrated by the fact that they do not fit in and thereby express their emotions through crying.

What to Do When This Happens

- Try to determine if the child cries over legitimate situations or is simply just hypersensitive.
- If the child is very sensitive, encourage him to share any problems he may be having with you before the crying begins.
- Have a group lesson on coping skills for the class and what to do when you feel upset over a situation with the objective on increasing a child's repertoire of "coping tools".
- When speaking with this type of child, try to speak in a soft and reassuring tone since this type of child may withdraw quickly if he feels threatened.
- If the child cannot express why he cries easily, help the child to try and verbalize his feelings by being patient and instilling confidence in him that everything will be O.K. You may also want to provide labels for any emotions you feel he may be encountering. Some children do not have the capacity, guidance or experience to come up with the correct label for an emotion. If they are unable to do this, the emotion remains suppressed and the tension continues to rise.
- Contact the parents to determine whether or not there are underlying problems which you may not be aware.
- Have this child work in groups with children who are more in tune with the feelings of others.
- Help the child try to determine what is causing him to cry so easily and then how to react appropriately rather than immediately crying.
- Teach self-esteem lessons within the class to help all children. For a child who cries easily, his self-esteem may be a critical reason why he exhibits this type of behavior.
- 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 Destroy the Property of Others

Academic Possibilities: Displaced frustration resulting from academic insecurity or failure may cause some children to act out towards those whom the child perceives as more capable.

Environmental Possibilities: Destroying the property of others may be a result of tension release stemming from intense home instability or dysfunction. The build up of fear, panic, frustration or anger, is sometimes released in the same manner as too much air in a balloon. The destruction of other's property is not a well thought out action in this case but rather a misguided displacement of emotions. At other times, this behavior may be the result of learned or modeled behavior or a pecking order behavior in that the child's own possessions are either destroyed or taken away at home.

Intellectual Possibilities: Same as Academic Possibilities

Language Possibilities: Not Applicable

Medical Possibilities: Not Applicable

Perceptual Possibilities: Not Applicable

Psychological Possibilities: While in most cases of destruction of property the incident is an isolated act, there are times when it may be a sign of a deeper disturbance. Such disorders like conduct disorders or oppositional defiant disorders may require more professional intervention. The overreactions in these cases can be intense, violent, and consistent and may be directed to both peers and authority figures. Conduct Disorder is characterized by a persistent pattern of behavior which intrudes and violates the basic rights of others without concern or fear of implications. This pattern is not selective and is exhibited in the home, at school, with peers and in the child's community. Other behaviors present with this condition may include vandalism, stealing, physical aggression, cruelty to animals and fire setting.

Oppositional Defiant Disorder usually characterized by patterns of negativistic, hostile and defiant behaviors with peers as well as adults. This disorder is considered less serious than a conduct disorder because of the absence of serious behaviors which violate the basic rights of others. Children with this disorder usually exhibit argumentative behaviors towards adults which may include swearing and frequent episodes of intense anger and annoyance. These symptoms are usually considered to be more serious and intense than those exhibited by other children of the same age.

Social Possibilities: Social rejection and retaliation may be behind the destruction of the property of others.

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 part is to sit with the child and find out what the need is to destroy the property of 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 destruction of the property of others 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 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 destroying property. 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 bully have done so because they feel they are not doing well in school, have problems at home or feel rejected by other students.
- Suggest to this student alternate means of resolving future conflicts. Many students who destroy things know no other alternative in handling difficult and stressful situations. They need to be educated on other means of response.

- Developing a sense of responsibility over one's behavior is another crucial lesson. It is important that you make sure that the child apologizes to the student whose property he destroyed either verbally or by a letter.
 - 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.
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Why Children Daydream

Academic: Some children will daydream simply because they are bored with the academic topic being taught in school. For some, it is no more complicated than that. Children have a tremendous potential to tune out to things which they do not like. When they tune out, they will begin to daydream about playing sports, hanging out with their friends, and many other possible upcoming or past events. More often than not, this is simply due to a lack of interest in the current academic topic. For others who struggle with academics, daydreaming insulates their feelings of inadequacy and takes them away from reality.

Environmental: Some children have very bad home lives. They live with constant conflict, fear, anxiety, and tension. Because of this, they will often go into their own world and fantasize about what it would be like to live in someone else's house. They create a new life for themselves and daydream about how it could all be so much better.

Intellectual: Not applicable

Language: Not applicable

Medical: Not applicable

Perceptual: Not applicable

Psychological: Children who daydream may be doing so because they have many deep rooted psychological issues which they are currently facing. Daydreaming can be about nothing at all or can be a serious way to escape from the real world. For some children, their low self-esteem and lack of understanding about why certain things are the way they are create sadness and discontent. Their daydreaming becomes the only way they can cope in a world which they believe is unfair and not for them.

Social: Some children may daydream because of all of the special events surrounding them. If there is an upcoming school dance, party or sporting event, it may not be possible for the student to focus on mathematics or reading. They begin to daydream about who they will dance with, who might be at the party, or hitting the home run in the championship game. Their daydreaming is due much more to social events clouding the academic picture rather than any type of deep psychological problem.

What to Do When This Happens

- Keep in mind that this should only be a concern if a pattern exists and the frequency and duration are problematic. The fact is everyone daydreams at some time of the day.
- Check with the school nurse and the child's parents to be sure that there is no medical problem which may be causing the child to daydream.
- Try to ascertain if a pattern exists in the child's daydreaming. See if it occurs more frequently in the morning, a possible sign of exhaustion, or in the afternoon, a sign of possible fatigue from a long school day, and during which subjects the child daydreams.
- Talk with the child about why he feels that he daydreams.
- 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.
- 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 daydreaming.
- 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.