



Series II – Step 4 - Be Aware of Symptoms Indicating Low Levels of Confidence

Adapted from the book, *Creating Confident Children in the Classroom: The Use of Positive Restructuring*.

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Introduction

An important part of Positive Restructuring is learning which students show signs of low levels of confidence. This knowledge will help you determine whether or not the use of Positive Restructuring is required. Becoming aware of the symptoms that indicate low levels of confidence will reduce frustration for both you and the students in your class and allow for more realistic intervention and expectations.

A high risk student lacking confidence is usually a student that has experienced possibly severe emotional, social, environmental or academic stress and /or failure. As a result of this intense turmoil, many symptoms are generated in a dynamic attempt to alleviate the anxiety. They can show up in many different behavior patterns. Some of the more common ones that can be exhibited by either elementary or secondary students while in school are:

- 1 - A history of adequate or high first quarter grades followed by a downward trend leading to failures in the final quarter.
- 2 - A history of excessive absences.
- 3 - A history of excessive lateness.
- 4 - Frequently cannot separate from parent at the start of the school day. While this can be normal behavior in very young children, it becomes a more serious symptom after age 6 or 7.
- 5 - High achievement scores and high school abilities index with a history of low academic performance.
- 6 - Consistent failure in two or more quarters of at least two subjects.

- 7 - A history of parent "coverage" for inappropriate behavior, poor work performance, poor attitude, failures , or absences.
- 8 - Students wandering the halls after school with no direction or purpose.
- 9 - A history of constant projection onto others as a reason for a lack of performance , handing in work , failures, or cutting.
- 10 - A history of feeling powerless in the student's approach to problems.
- 11 - Recent stress related experiences i.e. divorce, separation, death of a parent or parent's loss of employment.
- 12 - A history of constant visits to the nurse.
- 13 - Social withdrawal from peers with an emphasis on developing relationships with adults.

Once a pattern of low confidence is identified it is then important for teachers to understand how this may interfere with the child's ability to learn. Children who lack confidence are not "stubborn" or "lazy". The real reasons for a lack of academic production or inappropriate behavior may lie in their dynamic state of low confidence and how it affects their ability to learn in the classroom.

Be Aware of How Low Confidence Affects a Child's Ability to Function In the Classroom

Symptoms vs. Problems

It is very important that parents and educators recognize the difference between symptoms and problems. Many times, parents, teachers and professionals mistakenly try to correct a child's symptoms- e.g. stubbornness, procrastination, daydreaming -thinking that the symptoms might be the problem. However a serious problem exists within a child, the problem creates tension and this tension is released as symptomatic behavior. Symptoms reduce the tension created by a conflict or a problem, but treating the symptom will not treat the problem.

Symptoms work like signals to allow us the opportunity to realize that a serious problem exists. Negative symptomatic behavior results from serious conflicts or problems. Positive symptomatic behavior results when a child is free from serious conflicts or problems. Therefore, it is crucial that parents and educators understand both types of symptoms and what they represent so that they can deal with a potential problem as soon as possible.

Examples of typical symptomatic behavior that may be indicative of low confidence may include the following:

impulsivity	lies constantly	frequently hands in incomplete work
awkward	gives many excuses for inappropriate behavior	fearful of adults
constantly blames others for problems	fearful of new situations	panics easily
verbally hesitant	distractible	hypoactive
short attention span	hyperactive	over-reactive
fears criticism	physical with others	rarely takes chances
intrusive	moody	unable to focus on task
defies authority	procrastinates	anxious
turns head while listening	insecure	disorganization
trouble starting work	inflexibility	tires easily
irresponsibility	controlling	poor judgment
overly critical	denial	forgetfulness
daydreaming	painfully shy	unwillingness to venture a guess
overly social	unwillingness to reason	slow starter
social withdrawal	argumentative	constant use of self criticism
destroys property	bullies other children	lazy
needs constant reassurance	inconsistency	poor reader
poor spelling	argumentative	

Determine the Severity of a Problem

While many of these symptoms may indicate a problem, several guidelines should be used to determine the severity of the situation:

- 1) **FREQUENCY OF SYMPTOMS** - Consider how often the symptoms occur since the greater the frequency, the greater chance of a serious problem.
- 2) **DURATION OF SYMPTOMS** - Consider how long the symptoms last since the longer the duration, the more serious the problem.

3) INTENSITY OF SYMPTOMS - Consider how serious the reactions are at the time of occurrence since the more intense the symptom, the more serious the problem.

Symptoms which are ways to relieve tension are usually indications of conflicts, fears etc within the child. All conflicts require energy and the greater the number of conflicts or the more serious the conflict the greater expense of energy required. Since everyone has a certain amount of available energy, the energy required to deal with these conflicts must come from somewhere. Therefore conflicts tend to drain energy away from other processes such as concentration, memory, attention etc. That is usually why children with emotional problems may exhibit the following typical behaviors either in the classroom or at home.

Understand Avoidance Behavior Patterns as an Indication Of Low Levels of Confidence

Some of the first signs that a child experiencing problems with learning are avoidance behaviors. These are techniques used by children to avoid what they perceive as a failure provoking or an ego- deflating situation. Children will often exhibit these symptoms at home and at school to avoid loss of parental approval, peer humiliation, or failure. They are avoiding:

- showing their parents they are not capable
- dealing with possible parental anger and frustration
- coming face to face with their own inadequacy
- dealing with peer pressure and possible ridicule

Some of the more common avoidance behaviors are discussed in detail below:

- **Selective forgetting** - If a child knows the batting averages of all baseball players, the words from most songs on the radio, the times of most TV shows, but habitually "forgets" to bring home his or her math book the child is exhibiting selective forgetting. The selectivity of the forgetfulness usually centers around areas of learning that the child may find frustrating.
- **Forgetting to write down assignments day after day** - This symptom may continue even after repeated requests or threats. The child exhibiting this symptom is most likely trying to avoid a perceived-failure experience.
- **Taking hours to complete homework** - In this avoidance pattern the child seems to labor or procrastinate over school-work. Frequent trips to the kitchen for food, or to the bathroom, or to get a drink, or to sharpen a pencil, delay the possibility of what the child perceives will be failure. This symptom also occurs if a child is under tension and having difficulty concentrating for long periods of time.
- **Finishing homework very quickly** - The child exhibiting this symptom is trying to get the ego threatening situation (homework) over as quickly as possible. The child makes

every attempt to "rush" through the assignments with little if any care or patience. Getting it over as quickly as possible almost makes it seem as if it never existed.

- **Not being able to get started with homework** - When a child's anxiety level is very high it is very difficult to "start the engine." He or she may spend a great deal of time getting ready for homework by arranging books, sharpening pencils, getting the paper out, opening the textbooks, getting a glass of water, going to the bathroom, and so on. Once again, the child is trying to avoid the task that he or she finds threatening.
- **Frequently bringing home unfinished classwork** - A child can exhibit this symptom for several reasons. One reason could be that the child has a low energy level and therefore has difficulty dealing with tasks involving sustained concentration. The second reason could be that the child is dependent upon parental assistance with homework. If the child's parents constantly sit next to the child when he or she is doing homework the child can become conditioned to their assistance and feel helpless without it. Since the child misses such support in the classroom, the child procrastinates in doing his classwork so that he or she can bring it home do it with his or her parents. The third reason could be the child's need for attention. Bringing home unfinished classwork may necessitate a parent's sitting with him or her to complete the work. The child may see the parent as a "captive audience" and stop working or complain that he or she can't do the work if the parent tries to leave. Bringing home unfinished classwork extends the period of attention the child receives from his or her parents; however, these situations usually become more tense and negative as the hours progress and the parent's patience waivers.
- **Consistently leaving long term assignments until the last minute** - Avoidance of school-related tasks, especially long-term ones, is a frequent symptom of children with low energy levels. The behavior is analogous to avoiding paying a big bill when one has very little money. Another way one can avoid paying a bill is to forget that the bill exists. Similarly children who are anxious about being able to complete an assignment successfully try "magical thinking"; they try to wish the assignment out of existence or believe that it will magically be finished without any participation on their part.
- **Complaining of headaches, stomachaches, etc., before or after school** - A child's very high tension levels over an extended period of time may result in somatic (bodily) complaints. These complaints, while real to the child, may indicate his or her avoidance of an uncomfortable or ego-deflating situation. The physical discomfort or ailment becomes the excuse for not performing well or not performing at all.
- **Exhibiting "spotlight " behaviors** - "Spotlight" behaviors are behaviors that focus attention on the child-calling out, laughing out loud, getting up out of seat, annoying other children. When a child "spotlights" it is usually a release of tension. Some children use "spotlight" behaviors to alleviate the tension of academic inadequacy and may even hope to get into trouble to leave the room. In this way they will not have to deal with possible academic failure. Another reason for "spot light" behaviors is the need on the part of the child to be in control. However, the more controlling a child is, the more out of control that child may feel. The third reason for "spotlight" behaviors is to gain the teacher's attention. However in this way the child is determining when he or she gets attention, not the teacher. It is better for the teacher to spontaneously and randomly pay attention to such a child when the child is not expecting it. In this way the teacher (or the parent) can reduce the child's impulsive need to seek attention.

Understand How Negative Energy Drains Confidence and Affects Behavior and Learning

If a child is experiencing many conflicts, problems, insecurities etc., there will be an increase in the number, types, and degree of negative symptoms the child exhibits. All conflicts require energy, therefore, the greater the frequency, duration, and intensity of the symptoms, the greater the energy drain on the child. The energy required to deal with these conflicts must come from somewhere, and it tends to come from constructive such as concentration, memory, attention and so on. Since these constructive processes-so necessary for success in school-become threatened the child will begin to suffer.

Everyone has a certain amount of psychic energy to use in dealing with the everyday stresses of life. In normal development there is a certain amount of stress, but, because of an absence of major conflicts that would tend to drain energy, the individual has more than enough energy to keep things in perspective.

The division of energy and the generally positive symptoms that result when a child is relatively "conflict free" may take on a certain pattern. As a result, the child will exhibit behaviors that include good concentration, responsibility with school work, consistency, age appropriate attention span, flexibility, appropriate memory, high frustration tolerance, appropriate peer interaction, organization, and an appropriate ability to focus on tasks. Parents will notice these behaviors at home when the child does homework and educators will notice it at school. Not every child who is conflict free will exhibit these symptoms all the time, but the child's habits and behaviors will be predominately positive and constructive.

The child will also exhibit positive behavior patterns at home. These will generally include normal strivings for parental approval, resiliency, willingness to reason, willingness to try, exercising appropriate judgment, and responding normally to discipline. These patterns may vary to some degree during adolescence and still be within "normal" limits.

A relatively "conflict-free" child will usually have little difficulty falling asleep. While he or she may have problems waking up, as many of us do, it will not interfere in his or her ability to get to school. Socially, the child will generally maintain social interactions; show a willingness to try new social experiences and treat his/her peers appropriately.

When a child is troubled by serious conflicts his or her available energy must be "pulled " to deal with the conflicts, like white blood cells to an infection, and the child has less energy available to keep things in perspective. In this case the resulting symptoms and behaviors take on a different look.

Parents or educators, who suspect that a child is experiencing some difficulty because he or she exhibits some negative symptomatic pattern, do not hesitate to contact the school psychologist or contact a local therapist for a consultation. Following are examples of some of the causes of serious problems which might result in negative symptomatic behavior:

Intellectual Reasons

- Limited intelligence; slow learner
- Retardation

Social Reasons

- Peer pressure
- Peer rejection

Emotional Reasons

- Consistent school failure
- Traumatic emotional development
- Separation or divorce of parents
- High parental expectations
- Sibling performance
- Health-related problems
- Change in environment as a result of moving
- Abuse
- Dysfunctional family situation
- Parental loss of job
- Death in the family

Academic Reasons

- Learning disabilities
- Poor academic skills-math, reading
- Style of teacher incompatible with style of student
- Language difficulties
- Falling behind in school because of an imbalance in other areas i.e. too social

Negative behavior patterns such as those listed above will be evident in many areas of the child's life. For instance, at school the child may be unable to focus on task, may procrastinate, may daydream, may be disorganized, may reject help, may be irresponsible, inflexible, selectively forgetful, may project reasons for problems on everyone and everything else and so on. At home the child may be oversensitive, forgetful, reclusive, unreasonable, overactive, stubborn, untruthful, exaggerative, and may express somatic complaints such as stomachaches, headaches, and so on. The child's sleeping patterns may change. He or she may have great difficulty falling asleep since tension interferes with relaxation and may even begin to sleep walk or show other signs of restless sleep. The child may resist getting up in the morning which may result in lateness or absence. More frequent nightmares may also be a signal of some unresolved inner conflicts. Furthermore, the child may withdraw socially-constantly find fault with peers, be unwilling to try new social experiences, express social fears or express beliefs that no one likes him or her, and so on.

It is important to remember that such symptoms only occur as a result of a deeper undefined problem. Once the problem is identified and resolved and once the tension is alleviated, the negative symptomatic behavior will dissipate. If caught early, many such issues can be resolved in a relatively quick period of time. However, if the underlying problem is not identified for many months or years the treatment period will be longer.