

Identification of High Risk Students - Part 1 of 3

One of the most important tools that you, as a parent, can possess is the understanding of symptoms exhibited by your children that may indicate a high risk situation. Having a child with a disability requires a great deal of understanding and knowledge. However it is crucial for you to be able to “hear” and “see” symptoms that indicate that your child is struggling in school and whose problems may be going unnoticed. These struggles which may lead to more serious behaviors as a result of frustration can involve struggles with academic, social, emotional, and environmental issues. Keep in mind, like an infection, the faster your child is identified, the better chance he/she has in avoiding serious and long lasting problems. Therefore, it is imperative that you have a pulse on the “red flag” symptoms that high risk children exhibit.

A high risk child is usually one that is experiencing possibly severe emotional, social, environmental and/or academic stress. As a result of this intense turmoil, many symptoms are generated in a dynamic attempt to alleviate anxiety. It is also important to stop and look at your parenting style and issues that may be going on at home, as well as in school, to try to identify the source of these symptoms. They can show up in many different behavior patterns. Some of the more common patterns that can be exhibited by “high risk” 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: In this instance, a student will do very well in the first quarter but lack the energy, drive and motivation to sustain this performance. Eventually, the student will slide and by the 4th quarter the grades will reflect very poor school performance. This pattern is very common with children who have high anxiety levels and therefore, do not have the energy to sustain successful concentration and performance over a full school year.
- 2-** A history of excessive absences: This is a behavior that is often seen by children with possible school avoidance issues, high levels of anxiety, or students from possible situations that may not include organization or boundaries problems as a result of a specific type of parenting style.
- 3-** A history of excessive lateness: This pattern may be seen in children who are disorganized, have parents who are disorganized, have a chaotic home life, or serious medical conditions.
- 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 and should be looked into immediately.
- 5-** High achievement scores and high school abilities index (IQ) with a history of low academic performance: Many times this is seen by students who were once classified as “underachievers” but who really experience serious emotional issues that prevent them from performing up to their ability.
- 6-** Consistent failure in two or more quarters of at least two subjects: When a pattern of failure exists, this should immediately be looked at for possible causes. The child should not have to go another semester before this issue is investigated.

7- Students wandering the halls after school with no direction or purpose: Many children who come from homes that have many problems or are alone after school may exhibit this symptom. In other cases, children who are in need of attention or adult connections may also exhibit this symptom.

8- A history of constant projection onto others as a reason for a lack of performance, handing in work, failures, or cutting: Children with very weak or deflated self esteems will rarely take the responsibility for their actions. This often occurs because the ego cannot tolerate any more failure or awareness of poor judgment. What results is a projection out and a constant search for the “reason” being someone else or something else.

9- A history of feeling powerless in the student's approach to problems: Students who feel powerless, hopeless, despondent, and lack resources or tools for change, may make negative comments about themselves and their abilities. They will appear as victims and believe “why bother, it doesn’t matter anyway.” This type of comment is a very serious exhibition of a high risk student who has no resources and feels that anything that happens to him/her is the result of fate, luck or chance. These types of students never feel that anything they do will have any positive effect on their lives.

10- Recent stress related experiences, i.e. divorce, separation, death of a parent or parent's loss of employment: Any student who has experienced any of these issues should immediately be contacted and offered assistance and support if he/she needs it. If you know that your child is under this type of duress, contact the school psychologist or social worker immediately. Never assume someone else will do it.

11- A history of constant visits to the nurse: Constant visits to the nurse can be a sign of a high risk pattern. This is often seen in children who are vulnerable, have high anxiety, and feel unprotected. In their eyes, the nurse represents protection and reassurance.

12- Social withdrawal from peers with an emphasis on developing relationships with adults: While at times a normal and common characteristic of gifted children, avoidance of social interaction is a high risk behavior because it is a very unnatural action. Social connection and acceptance are a crucial need of all children, and the avoidance of this may indicate serious social or emotional turmoil.

In conclusion, we need to do everything we can to identify any child who is struggling so that future and possibly more serious behaviors do not occur.

Adapted from *The Special Educator's Book of Lists*/2004/Pierangelo/Jossey Bass Publishers