

Identification of High Risk Behavior - Part II

Understanding the Difference between Symptoms and Problems

Children will first “communicate” their problems, conflicts, fears, etc. through symptomatic behavior which is often mistaken for THE PROBLEM. What parents need to know is when they are seeing a symptom and when it is a problem. If a child does not recognize or does not have the label for the problem, then the tension is usually released through some form of behavior. We call these outlets of tension, “behavioral symptoms”. Behavioral symptoms are sometimes misidentified as problems, and therefore treated as such. When this occurs, the problem only gets worse. For example, if one sees a fever as the problem, then treating that alone will exacerbate the problem. Behavioral symptoms become the first signal noticed by teachers, parents and professionals. Therefore, it is very important for parents to understand the difference between symptoms and problems. If this is not fully understood, a great deal of frustration will occur in trying to extinguish the symptom on both the part of the child and the parent.

Dynamic or internal problems, e.g., conflicts, fears, insecurities, create tension. The more serious the problem, the greater the level of tension experienced by a child. When tension is present, behavior is used to relieve the tension. The more serious the problem/s, the greater the tension and the behavior required to relieve this tension becomes more immediate. As a result, the behavior may be inappropriate and impulsive rather than well thought out.

When tension is very high, it may require a variety of behaviors to relieve the dynamic stress. These behaviors then become symptoms of the seriousness of the problem. That is why the frequency and intensity of the symptomatic behavior reflect the seriousness of the underlying problem/s.

As the child becomes more confident or learns to work out his problems, i.e. through therapy, classroom management, behavior intervention plans etc., the underlying problems tend to become smaller. As a result, these problems “shrink” and generate less tension. Consequently, what generally occurs are less inappropriate, impulsive or self-destructive behavior patterns.

The identification of symptoms as an indication of something more serious is another first step in helping children work out their problems. Note that the following list of behaviors may be at some time exhibited by all children and may not necessarily reflect a deeper problem. Examples of typical symptomatic behavior patterns that may be indicative of more serious concerns include the following:

NASET's Parent Teacher Conference Handouts

impulsivity	lies constantly
frequently hands in incomplete work	awkward
fearful of adults	gives many excuses for inappropriate behavior
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
squints	not able to generalize
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	constant use of self criticism
bullies other children	needs constant reassurance
poor reader	argumentative
argumentative	destroys property
lazy	inconsistency
poor spelling	

While many of these symptoms may indicate the presence of a problem, you should apply several guidelines to determine the seriousness of the problem/s:

1) FREQUENCY OF SYMPTOMS - Consider how often the symptoms occur. The more serious the problem, the greater amount of tension generated. The greater amount of tension the more frequent the need will be to release this tension. If the frequency of the symptoms is high, you can be sure that the underlying problem(s) are very serious.

2) DURATION OF SYMPTOMS - Consider how long the symptoms last. The more serious the problem, the greater the degree of tension generated. The greater the degree, the longer it will take to release the tension. Therefore, the longer the symptoms hang around, the more serious the problem.

3) INTENSITY OF SYMPTOMS - Consider how serious the reactions are at the time of occurrence. The more serious the issues, the more intense the level of tension will be coming off the problem like heat off a radiator. Therefore, what occurs will likely be more serious types of outbursts.

In conclusion, if you notice a frequency, intensity or long duration of inappropriate behaviors, or symptoms as discussed, immediately contact your child's classroom teacher, or the school psychologist for assistance. Remember, the sooner you identify the underlying problem, the greater the chance for a resolution. Like an infection, if you do not identify the source, the infection will begin to affect secondary sites and spread throughout the body. Underlying serious problems that go untreated can have long term negative effects.

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