

Identifying High Risk Children-Part III

Avoidance Behaviors

There will be times when parents may first get signals of potential high risk patterns before anyone else. Parents, without being aware, may actually be seeing symptoms that indicate the presence of high risk patterns that first develop at home. Therefore it is very important that parents learn to listen for the “language” of high risk patterns that may be exhibited by children while at home and not necessarily at school.

Perhaps the first things parents will notice when children are experiencing problems with learning are several Avoidance Symptoms. These are techniques used by children to avoid what they perceive as a failure or an ego deflating situation. Children will often exhibit these symptoms at home and maybe at school to avoid loss of parental approval, peer humiliation or fear of failure. By utilizing these avoidance tools, children do not have to:

- a) show their parents they are not capable
- b) deal with possible parental anger and frustration
- c) come face to face with their own inadequacy
- d) deal with peer pressure and possible ridicule

Avoidance behaviors are common "tools " utilized by children who are experiencing problems in learning. Some of the more common ones are as follows:

Selective forgetting - This is a symptom in which the child knows the batting averages of all baseball players, the words from most songs on the radio, the times of most TV shows , but "forgets" to bring home his/her math book etc. The selectivity of the forgetfulness usually centers on areas of learning that may be creating frustration.

Forgets to write down assignments day after day - This symptom may continue even after repeated requests or threats. The avoidance of a perceived failure experience is accomplished through the use of this behavior.

Takes hours to complete homework - In this particular case, the child seems to labor or procrastinate over the work. Frequent trips to the kitchen for food, or to the bathroom, or to get a drink, or sharpen a pencil, will delay the possibility of perceived failure. This symptom also occurs if a child is under tension and cannot concentrate for long periods of time. He/she will tend to "burn out "quickly and day dream the night away.

Finishes homework very quickly - In this type of symptom the child's major objective is to get the ego threatening situation (homework) over as quickly as possible. Every attempt is made 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.

Can't seem to get started with homework - When a child's anxiety level is very high it makes it very difficult to "start the engine." Like a cold engine on a winter day, you can turn the key and it revs but never turns over. This type of child acts in the same way. They may spend a great deal of time getting "ready " for the homework by arranging their books, sharpening pencils , getting the paper out, opening the textbooks, getting a glass of water, going to the bathroom and so on , but never really starting their assignments.

Frequently brings home unfinished classwork - This symptom is frequently exhibited by students for several reasons. One reason is a low energy level and therefore problems dealing with tasks involving sustained concentration. The second reason may involve the concept of learned helplessness and may arise when a parent constantly sits next to a child when he/she is doing homework. The child becomes conditioned to this assistance and is helpless without it. Since someone sitting next to the child is not recreated in the classroom, the child will procrastinate while doing his/her classwork so that he/she can bring it home and have someone do it with him/her.

The third reason may involve the child's need for attention. Bringing home unfinished classwork necessitates some parents need to sit with them and complete the work. This "captive audience" of parent attention is reinforced when a parent tries to leave. The child stops working or complains that he/she can't do it. Consequently, the parent remains seated next to the child. Bringing home unfinished classwork extends the period of attention the child may receive from the parent. However, these type of situations usually become more tense and negative as the hours progress and the parent's patience waivers.

Consistently leaves 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. It would be like avoiding paying a big bill when you have very little money. You may "hide" the bill or forget it exists. Magical thinking is a frequent dynamic mechanism of children who are highly anxious.

Complains of headaches, stomachaches, etc before or after school - A very high level of tension over an extended period of time may result in somatic (bodily) complaints. These complaints, while real to the child, may indicate an avoidance of an uncomfortable or ego deflating situation. When a child has a pattern of these types of complaints, then the teacher needs to see this "signal" as a symptom of a more serious problem.

Exhibits "spot light "behaviors - "Spot light" behaviors are any behaviors that bring the focus of attention to the child i.e. calling out, laughing out loud, and getting up out of seat, annoying other children. When this occurs it is usually a release of tension. Some children use "spot light" 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 control. However, keep in mind that the more controlling a child is, the more out of control they feel. The third reason for a "spot light" behavior may be the need of the child to gain the teachers attention. However in this way the child is determining when he/she gets attention, not the teacher. It is better for the teacher to spontaneously and randomly pay attention to such a child when he/she is not expecting it. In this way you may reduce the impulsive need for seeking out attention.

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