

# Dealing With School Related Problems

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When dealing with your child's school related problems there's no need to feel alone. Help is available. In this chapter I offer a few basic suggestions that can help you in beginning to deal with some of the more common school related problems.

## **What are School Related Problems?**

Children and adolescents spend the greater portion of their week in school and school related activities. At school they develop their minds, their social roles, their peer relations, and their relations to authority.

It is best to not think about school related problems as obstacles blocking the way to a goal but rather as a part of the process of learning. Learning how to resolve problems is what school, growing up and maturing are all about.

When we can help children come to terms with the problems that they encounter at school, we help them to change their lives and to grow.

## **Two Kinds of School Related Problems: Behavior Problems and Academic Problems**

*Behavior Problems* are those that get in the way of social and academic learning. They include:

- Problems in relating to peers
- Problems in relating to authority
- Disruptive behavior
- Violent behavior
- Withdrawn behavior
- Preoccupation with other problems
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Bizarre behavior

*Academic Problems* are those related to academic functioning but do not necessarily disturb social adjustment or indicate an emotional problem. Academic problems include:

- Poor study habits
- Learning disabilities
- Intellectual deficits

## **Behavior Problems as Psychological Problems**

The following are a few categories of psychological problems and some of the problematic classroom behavior that can be seen as a result.

*Depression* - withdrawal, reticence, anger, violence, acting out, excessive selfless taking care of others, no interest in school

*Anxiety* - distraction, irritability, difficulty concentrating, acting out, perfectionism  
*Substance abuse* - intoxication, a sudden drop in interest at school, poor self-care, poor impulse control  
*Impulse Problems* - arguments, fights, sexually provocative behavior, substance abuse, a diffuse identity, acting out  
*Confusional States* – intense psychosocial symptoms of any kind; strange toileting behavior, eating behavior, and sexual inappropriateness

In some cases behavior problems in the classroom may have a biological basis or they may be caused by family discord, interpersonal problems, developmental changes, etc. And yet the solution to the problem may not always be directly related to the cause of the problem. For example: If a child is distracted in class because he is preoccupied with his parent's marital discord, a referral to a family therapist isn't the only strategy available to the teacher. Maybe it will be enough to seat the student in a place where it is easier for him to concentrate. We don't want to over-simplify problems but we also don't want to make the problem so complex that we can't deal with it either.

### **What to do about School Related Problems**

1. The first thing for you to do when encountering a school related problem is to talk to your child's teacher. Discuss the problem and work on developing a good relationship with the teacher. Your child's teacher knows your child's academic achievement in relation to other children of the same age, observes your child on the playground or on campus and has a good sense of your child's abilities. Because of this he/she may have some ideas about why the problem is emerging and what might be useful to try to help your child deal with the problem.
2. Discuss your concerns with your child and see what you can learn. There is a story behind every behavior problem and if we know what it is, it can often help us to resolve the problem.
3. Once the problem has been identified, there may remain difficulties in attending to the problem. The classroom is not a setting for individual psychotherapy or other specialized interventions. The teacher needs to remain committed to the education of the group and if one child is not able to function in the group independently, the child may need a tutor, an aid, or even a different classroom setting. Nonetheless, sometimes a teacher is able to modify the structure of the class in small ways to address the needs of an individual. So, it is always worth exploring.
4. Sometimes the child's problem may be exacerbated by the very structure of the class itself. Some children have difficulty concentrating in a classroom that has a lot of visual and auditory stimulation. Perhaps the school day is longer than the child can effectively work within. Perhaps the child is sitting next to others who are tempting the child into some sort of mischief. Parents and teachers need to be able to realistically assess the classroom environment and recognize ways in which its structure may be a set-up for certain kinds of misbehavior for some children.

5. Make your child's world small enough to be successful in and large enough to be challenging. In other words, don't stifle or constrict his/her freedom and desire to grow and don't give so much freedom that it becomes a set-up for failure. Don't give so little responsibility that your child is infantilized, bored and made to feel useless and inept. And don't give so much responsibility that your child is sure to fail.
6. When setting limits, establish appropriate limits, logical consequences and be consistent.
7. If your children aren't getting ready for school on time in the morning, have them get up earlier.
8. If your children aren't finishing their homework, suspend playtime until chores and homework are completed.
9. Help children to do their homework. Don't do their homework for them.
10. Make sure that children have the supplies they need - a shelf for books, a box for homework assignments, a box for completed homework, paper, pencils, pens, rulers, a clear well-lighted desk to work at and a quiet work environment.
11. Acknowledge a job well done.
12. Recognize low grades not as a reason for shame and punishment but simply as a call for extra help.
13. Teach your children to manage their time in order to finish their homework, play, eat dinner, prepare for the next day and be ready for sleep at a reasonable hour.
14. If your children are always too tired in the morning, have them go to sleep earlier.
15. Good nutrition is essential for a good education.
16. When children fight and act out at school, they need to be helped to express themselves differently. They need to be invited to say with their words what they are trying to say with their actions.
17. When children are not attending to the teacher in class we need to examine the most immediate causes first. What distractions are in the room? Who sits next to whom? We can often solve attention problems by simply moving the child away from a distracting classmate or to another chair closer to the teacher.
18. Show an interest in your child's work.

19. Avoid shame, ridicule, brutality and insults at all costs.
20. Teach you children that learning is more important than grades.
21. Avoid perfectionist attitudes. Expect mistakes. Allow for mistakes and help your children to learn from their mistakes.
22. Remember that parents teach by what they say and by example. Parents are models for their children's behavior.
23. If you value your child's education, demonstrate it. Let your children know that their education is important to you.
24. Maintain healthy habits - good nutrition, exercise, and exposure to the culture and the values you adhere to.
25. Let your children see you using a dictionary, an encyclopedia, a calculator, a computer, a pen, a book.
26. Read to your children and when they are able, have them read to you.
27. Hang your child's art on the walls. Enjoy it, replace it with new pictures and keep the old ones in a box that you will one day, be able to look into and remember with fondness.
28. It is important to remember that parents, teachers, principals and children are all on the same team.
29. If your child is having no problems in school, make sure you attend parent-teacher conferences anyway.
30. When your child encounters a school related problem, your first move should be to contact your child's teacher. See if you can solve the problem together. If you need more help, call in the school counselor or the principal. If it seems like a problem requiring a psychologist, call one and ask for a consultation. A psychologist may be able to help with parent consultation sessions, teacher consultations, an evaluation, child psychotherapy, adult psychotherapy, or family therapy. The first step in working with a psychologist is an initial consultation and it is often impressive how much can be accomplished in just the first few sessions.

### **Final Comments**

The teacher's primary job is to educate a group, not to design a special program for each and every child. But there are always a few children in the class that need a little something extra. Though time, for a teacher, is difficult to come by, if parent and teacher

can work together they can sometimes understand the problem behind the problem. Talk to your child and his/her teachers for ideas about how to solve the problem. Be creative. Some problems in the classroom can be solved very simply by, for example, changing a seating arrangement, helping a child schedule his/her time differently, providing a tutor, sending weekly progress notes home with the child, writing assignments down in addition to announcing them orally, pairing students up to maximize learning opportunities, limiting the length of the day so that the child can experience some level of success and then slowly increasing the time at school until he/she is able to successfully participate in the entire day, holding children responsible for their actions, making the tasks small enough for the student to succeed and large enough for the student to be challenged. To help the day dreaming child focus, offer a designated time for drawing and daydreaming and ask the child to spend the rest of his/her time focused on academic work. Teach study skills explicitly, and when all else fails, seek outside support from trusted professionals.

### **The Clinical Psychologist**

A clinical psychologist can provide individual child therapy, parent consultation, couples therapy, family therapy as well as individual adult psychotherapy.

**Child Therapy** – In child therapy the psychologist establishes a relationship with the child by inviting him/her to speak not only in words but also in the language of play. As a child develops a relationship with the therapist through play, themes of conflict and hurt slowly emerge in the metaphors of the play themes. In playing out and talking out their concerns with a therapist, children are often able to resolve the psychological conflicts that had previously been the source of their anxiety, for example, and, in doing so, resolve their behavior problems at school. Play therapists generally meet with their child patients one to three or even four times a week over a period of months or years.

**Parent Consultation** - Parent consultation is a necessary part of child therapy but it is also an intervention all on its own. In a parent consultation the parents of the child, whose behavior has aroused concern, meet with the therapist, discuss the problems and formulate new strategies for setting limits, teaching empathy, assisting with academics, resolving fears, etc. Parent consultation sessions are best scheduled on a once weekly basis but can also be scheduled on an as needed basis.

**Couples therapy** – Sometimes a child is depressed or anxious or acting out in class because there is considerable marital discord in the home. In circumstances like this, it is often helpful if the child is in individual therapy but it is essential that the parents get into couples therapy. Often the troubled child will begin to do better in school as soon as the parents identify their own problem and start dealing with it effectively. When a couple enters couples therapy and begins to explain the marital concerns to the therapist, the communication problems within the couple often become apparent in the way they tell their story. The therapist listens, helps them to improve their communication, understand their problems and helps them to resolve those problems by inviting them to practice new and different communication styles with one another.

**Family therapy** – Sometimes behavior problems in one member of a family are due to breakdowns in communication in the family as a whole. In these circumstances it is often helpful for the whole family to go see the therapist, to see if it can improve communication and talk about what needs to be talked about – family secrets, family myths, family problems, etc.

**Teacher Consultation** – Teachers can also consult with a therapist regarding their concerns about children in their classes. The psychologist can meet with the teacher in formal Teacher Consultation Sessions, observe in the classroom, read reports and work with the teacher to generate an educational plan based on a psychological formulation, to help resolve the problem.

**Individual adult psychotherapy** – Sometimes we find that a child’s behavior problem in the classroom is directly related to a very personal problem of one of the parents. In this circumstance, it may be quite useful for the parent to pursue his or her own personal psychotherapy. Individual adult psychotherapy is a place to talk about things that are difficult to talk about and we find that people often feel much better and are less symptomatic after they have had the opportunity to put some things on the table, sort them out and make some different decisions. When a parent is less conflicted and therefore more available to the child, the child is often less symptomatic.

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