

Behavior Management Series

Issue #1

Why Children Have Unexcused Absences

Academic Possibilities: Some children may have unexcused absences because they have not completed their homework and are afraid of either the teacher's or peer reaction.

Environmental Possibilities: Chronic unexcused absence to school may indicate a functional impairment at home. Some family routines, rules, supervision, authority or boundaries may be seriously problematic. Family dysfunction can contribute to a chaotic and unstable environment which can prohibit children from attending school.

Intellectual Possibilities: Some children with limited intelligence may not attend school because they know that they can not keep up with their classmates. They struggle every day. Unfortunately, they are trying their hardest but their limited or below average capabilities do let them excel the way their classmates do.

Language Possibilities: Children with language problems or disabilities may miss school due to frustration. Their problems with language become so tension filled that after a while, it is no longer enjoyable nor worth it to attend school.

Medical Possibilities: Certain types of medical problems can affect children's school attendance. However, if a medical condition is the cause for unexcused absences, then the parent needs to provide some documentation.

Perceptual Possibilities: Children with perceptual problems may miss school due to anxiety. Their problems with perceptual functioning (whether auditory, visual or both) may frustrate them and lead to avoidance of school.

Psychological Possibilities: Depression, anxiety or low self-esteem are just a few of the many possible reasons for a child's unexcused absences. Children with psychological problems may not see school as being constructive. They have so many underlying issues that the ability to focus and do school work and interact with their peers does not seem possible due to their low energy levels.

Social Possibilities: Some children may have unexcused absences to avoid an uncomfortable confrontation with some child prior to, during or after school. Some social argument, a bully or some type of retaliation fear can be at the root of a child missing school.

What to Do When This Happens

• *Contact your school principal and get permission to contact the parents.* It is possible that the parents have no idea that their child has unexcused absences.

• ***Try to determine why the student is missing school by simply asking him.*** If he has shown a serious pattern of unexcused absences and offers a simple illogical answer, then the truth may lie elsewhere.

• ***Discuss with the school psychologist whether there are any extenuating circumstances as to why this child is missing school.***

If it is determined that the reason for unexcused absences is due to some behavior on the part of the child, in spite of parental involvement in getting the child to school, try the following techniques:

- Give the student a specific responsibility to do first thing in the morning to encourage him to be in school.
- Provide consequences for unexcused absences. One effective way of doing this is that if the child does not have an acceptable/legal reason for missing school, make the student responsible for the time missed.
- Place the student in a position of leadership for some group activity that occurs in school. This places a value on group responsibility.
- Reward the child for attending school. This does not have to be a tangible reward, but merely verbal praise - an indication of appreciation for following school rules.
- Develop a behavioral contract of expected and acceptable behaviors along with consequences and rewards. This can be done by working with your school psychologist.

• ***If it is determined that the reason for missing school is based on parental irresponsibility,*** talk to your principal to discuss whether or not it is appropriate for you or an administrator to meet with the parents and discuss the school's concerns. If it persists in spite of a meeting with the parents, the Child Study Team should be contacted immediately to determine whether or not there is suspected educational neglect.

Why Children Exhibit Overall Academic Failure in School

Academic Possibilities: There is no doubt that a lack of skills can have a direct effect on a child's ability to perform in school. Whether this has occurred as a result of inconsistent school attendance, frequent changes in schools by parents, poor teaching, trauma, etc. the result is the same. Pure academic deficiencies tend to accumulate year to year if not recognized early. After a while, the child feels so much pressure and feels so far behind that he gives up.

Environmental Possibilities: Children may fail in school as a result of several environmental factors. Children who come from dysfunctional homes may not have the routine, supervision nor boundaries required at certain ages to enhance achievement. Also, children who come from a home with high levels of tension (i.e. abusive, alcoholism) may be so preoccupied with fear of reaction or preoccupation with upsetting a parent that they cannot muster enough energy to concentrate, retain, and focus during school. Sometimes, children fail due to excessive parental expectations which they feel they cannot fill, so they give up, Others may not succeed due to competition or comparisons with a successful sibling.

Intellectual Possibilities: Limited intellectual ability will be a significant factor in a child's academic performance levels. If a child has limited intellectual capacity, he will lag behind other students and may eventually give up. Also, gifted children who go undetected may find school boring or not challenging, and thereby lack the motivation for performance.

Language Possibilities: Children with language disorders or who are bilingual may fail in school because they cannot understand what is being taught nor expected of them.

Medical Possibilities: Some medical conditions may result in limitations in performance (i.e. eye muscle problems which affect eyesight, preoccupation with a health condition [i.e. heart condition]) or limit performance directly (i.e. neurological disorders).

Perceptual Possibilities: Perceptual deficits that result in learning disabilities can result in school failure. Children who have slow processing speeds as a result of these deficits will lag behind, feel inadequate, and in many cases give up. Processing information slowly, in spite of adequate intelligence, can be very frustrating and embarrassing for children who then see academic resistance secondary to the fear of being ridiculed.

Psychological Possibilities: Children may fail in school as a result of low self esteem, low confidence levels, high anxiety or depression. Any one of these factors can greatly interfere with a child's ability to adequately perform over a consistent period of time.

Social Possibilities: Some children fail in school because they want to be accepted by a social group that does not respect academic performance. Sometimes, bright children are drawn to social groups of underachievers, and the group message is clear: "Don't achieve if you want to be part of this group". The group message is to protect the members from realizing their inadequacy. The child will then sacrifice his academic performance for entrance into this social group. Other children may fail because they do not feel they can compete or keep up with peer performance.

What to Do When This Happens

- *Set up a meeting with the school psychologist to discuss all possible reasons why the student may be failing.*
- *Review the student's records including past teacher comments for similar types of symptoms exhibited by the child in earlier grades.* If this is found, the problem may be more serious. Also, it would be very helpful to talk to the student's prior teachers to get feedback on what they tried that worked and did not work, since you do not want to repeat something that proved ineffective in the past.
- *Review past report cards looking for consistent difficulties in certain subject areas.* Sometimes, children with serious learning problems or learning disabilities will show patterns of academic failure over a long period of time.
- *Review the child's group achievement test scores which may give you some idea of skill levels.* However, be aware that since it is a group administered test, some children with serious learning problems may not have taken it seriously.

• ***If available, review the child's IQ scores.*** They may offer insight into the child's overall intellectual ability. If you believe the child is working to his capabilities, has an average to above average IQ, and yet is still failing in school, this warrants immediate attention.

• ***Meet with the school nurse to review the child's medical records for any medical reason that might be contributing to school failure.*** Ask about hearing and eyesight and whether or not the child is on any medications.

• ***Finally, refer this child to the Child Study Team in your school for further discussion, especially if you have found patterns in your review of the child's records.*** It is very important to understand that referring a child who is exhibiting overall school failure to the child study team should never be looked at as a reflection of your teaching ability.

Why Children Have High Activity Levels

Academic Possibilities: When children are failing at school, they can become very nervous and anxious. Their inability to succeed creates a state of tension because of the knowledge that they are not as good as everyone else in school. This anxiety over school work then becomes manifested as nervous tension resulting in high activity levels.

Environmental Possibilities: Some children live in homes where the pace is very high. Everyone in their families is moving very fast, and this is what they are exposed to day after day. They then model the behavior that is learned at home.

Intellectual Possibilities: Children with low levels of intelligence may not understand that there is a time and place for high activity. These children may just constantly be on the move not because of medical problems, but rather they do not understand that high activity levels can be inappropriate at certain times.

Language Possibilities: Not applicable

Medical Possibilities: Children who have Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) will be prone to suffer from high activity levels. The cause of this disorder is still unknown but recent research suggests that it is a biological condition.

Accurate and early diagnosis is crucial for the child with Attention Deficit Disorder. This will facilitate a treatment plan and reduce the chances of secondary problems. Follow the checklist below if you think the child in your room may have Attention Deficit Disorder. Compare the child's behavior to the following list of symptoms:

INATTENTION - AT LEAST THREE OF THE FOLLOWING:

- The child often fails to finish things he starts.
- The child often doesn't seem to listen.
- The child is easily distracted.

- The child has difficulty concentrating on schoolwork or other tasks requiring sustained attention.
- The child has difficulty sticking to a play activity.

IMPULSIVITY - AT LEAST THREE OF THE FOLLOWING:

- The child often acts before thinking.
- The child shifts excessively from one activity to another.
- The child has difficulty organizing work.
- The child needs a lot of supervision.
- The child frequently calls out in class.
- The child has difficulty awaiting turn in games or group situations.

HYPERACTIVITY - AT LEAST TWO OF THE FOLLOWING:

- The child runs about or climbs on things excessively.
- The child has difficulty sitting still or fidgets excessively.
- The child has difficulty staying seated.
- The child moves about excessively during sleep.
- The child is always "on the go" or acts as if "driven by a motor."
- Onset before the age of 7
- Duration of at least 6 months

Perceptual Possibilities: Not applicable

Psychological Possibilities: When children feel uptight and nervous about personal problems, conflicts, fears etc. going on in their lives, it can result in high activity. Other children may exhibit high activity as a means of being in the "spotlight" and maintaining attention on themselves.

Social Possibilities: Some children can be very active because they are anticipating events that are happening within the school or with their peers. Their hyperactivity is, in actuality, excitement about what is coming up with them socially. Also, children who are hyperactive may do so as a group because they all feed off of each other in this behavior. Individually, each child may be fine, but socially as a group, they become a very active and wild bunch of kids.

What to Do When This Happens

• Contact the school psychologist to find out whether the child has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and/or has ever been in special education.

• Contact the school nurse just to check that the child is not on any medication for his hyperactivity (i.e.; Ritalin).

• Assuming neither of the above, then sit the child down and discuss with him why he behaves in this manner. Many children may be doing this because they are seeking attention in some

way. Explain to the child that you recognize what he is doing and set up some way to show him that you will recognize him whenever he makes a particular move or statement. This way the child will not have to jump all over every question and/or answer.

- ***Explain the class rules to the child and what is and is not appropriate.*** It is possible that this child has not had the type of structure necessary for this grade level.

- ***Have a discussion with the school psychologist about how to deal with this situation.*** Psychologists are usually very trained in this area and have numerous behavioral intervention plans to help teachers when a child is hyperactive.

- ***Contact the parents if the situation gets out of hand to a point where it is seriously affecting the child's social, emotional or academic functioning.***

- **DO NOT DISCUSS THE IDEA OF MEDICATION WITH THE PARENTS!!** This is not your role nor your area of expertise. Although you may feel that medication is appropriate, you are not the professional to make the recommendation.

- ***Since it is almost assured that you will have 1 or 2 children in you class with hyperactivity every year, it becomes imperative that you plan ahead and expect this behavior to occur.*** You should have a plan about what you will do if a child's hyperactivity affects the class, and then use best practices for effective classroom management.

- ***If the problem persists to the point where it is affecting the child's everyday functioning, his situation should be brought up to the Child Study Team in the school so that his situation is appropriately evaluated.***