

Learning Problems Resulting from Emotional Disturbance in Childhood
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LEARNING PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCES IN CHILDHOOD

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A diminished capacity to learn is a frequent symptom shown by children with an emotional disturbance. Many other factors may also influence the child's ability to learn.

A. Non-emotional Factors that Interfere with Capacity to Learn

A diminished capacity to learn may result from:

1. An inherited potential to learn that is lower than the potential possessed by the average person.
2. Organic brain dysfunction due to prenatal or postnatal biological factors.
3. Defective or impaired sensory receptors (sight, hearing, touch, position sense, balance); e.g. poor vision, hearing, touch skills, and body position skills.
4. A low energy level due to fatigue, illness, malnutrition, inadequate sleep or psychological factors will impair ability to learn.
5. Inadequate environmental stimulation in a variety of ways: e.g. insufficient stimulation to build up adequate percepts and concepts; poor schooling; restrictive home environments; having bright children in a slow moving class where they become bored and inattentive; or insufficient involvement with people to build an identification as a learner.
6. Improper or unpleasant conditioning experiences. The child may associate the pain of punishment with the teacher or with school rather than with not getting his lessons. Teachers and parents may attempt to impose the "reality principal" too early, too suddenly, or too harshly, and the child may react by negativism, stubbornness, hostility to; or withdrawal and avoidance from educational tasks. The child may feel he is not sufficiently rewarded for his efforts to acquire new skills, and thus avoids learning tasks.

B. Feelings and Emotions Dominate Over Reason and Logic

The small child functions very much on the level of feelings and emotions. Adult type of logic and reason are only gradually developed. Most important to the small child is the feeling that parents or parent substitutes (teachers) love him and care about him. A most gratifying reward to the small child is love and acceptance from a parent or teacher. To gain an expression of love or approval a child will learn dull material or material of little value. The small child has not developed the capacity to discriminate what is important and what is unimportant. He is dependent on the adults in his world to make this selection for him.

If the child's relationships with the people in his world are poor, or if feelings are bad between a child and his teacher he may refuse to learn interesting material. We are not apt to trust information from or to identify with people we do not like. If we feel a person is giving us poison we are apt to refuse to take it in and make it a part of ourself. Learning is a process of assimilation of new information and incorporation of this information into our organized systems or frameworks of information.

The small child will often refuse to accept responsibility for his own failures. He may see promotion or failure as the teacher liking and approving of him or disliking and rejecting him. If he fails the small child is apt to blame the teacher, the school, or factors outside of himself for his failure. Children want and need to succeed. If they are trying to learn, e.g. to succeed, and are consistently failing, then they are apt to feel it is not their effort, motivation, or involvement that causes their failure. They are apt to feel their world is making demands in excess of their abilities. Common responses from children conditioned to failure are: "I don't know", "I can't do it", or "I'm not very good at it", or "I'm no good at it".

The small child operates primarily on the basis of feelings: he seeks pleasure and seeks to avoid pain. He does not yet know or comprehend the value of a formal education. If he finds the learning of certain subject material too painful he may develop an avoidance reaction toward the material. This avoidance reaction, if reinforced, may persist for many years or for life. The time honored and traditional manner of demanding maturity before it has had adequate time and opportunity to develop, and of imposing the "reality principal" too harshly, too early may miss its goal. The desired goal is the learning of certain subject material. The end product for some children, may be that pain and discomfort are connected with teachers, schools, certain subjects or learning in general. If it occurs this pain and resulting avoidance reaction and anxiety may be displaced onto certain isolated things such as certain words or numbers that are unconsciously associated with unpleasant experiences. This may lead to specific word or number phobias. More often than specific word or number phobias we are apt to see a hostile, negative, rebellious attitude about school and the formal learning situation, or a passive withdrawal from the frustration involved in formal learning.

C. Early Immaturities

Before age five or six years of age, children are comparatively immature and in many ways operate at a primitive level of feeling and thinking. Here feelings are often dominant, the child responds impulsively on the basis of his feelings of the moment. His needs and feelings of the moment easily deflect his attention. He is self-centered, has a poor capacity for delay of impulse. The preschool child's internal controls easily give way to strong feelings and impulses. Before age five or six the child's psychological defenses are apt to be simple and his concept of fairness is easily corrupted by his feelings and needs of the moment. Only gradually does the child learn to accept the rules of fair play. His self-centeredness reduces his ability to consider others' feelings or needs on a long term basis. He may consider another's feelings at one moment, but a moment later his own feelings may dominate and control his perceptions, thoughts, and behavior.

Motivation for Learning

In humans, learning is basic for adaptation and self-preservation. Early patterns of psychological growth for effective human functioning are most readily acquired by imitation and identification. The small child is highly dependent upon others for his schemes and systems of knowledge, and he acquires these through imitation and identification.

The child is aware of his dependence on adults. He views adults as strong, independent and self-sufficient. Normally the child desires to become an adult to lessen his insecurity and lessen his feelings of being weak, helpless, and dependent. The child learns for a variety of reasons. Partly the child learns so he can gain the adult's power, self-sufficiency, and apparent freedom. The child also learns to keep up with or compete with his peers. His envy of his peers and their achievements often motivates knowledge. A fear of peer or group hostility may enhance or inhibit some types of learning, or may cause the desire to learn to be directed into certain channels. At times, these other channels may be directed away from academic learning.

E. Psychological Identification and Learning

The child tends to mold himself in the image of the adults he trusts, and who gratify his needs. The child imitates these adults and attempts to master their skills. Motivation for learning and the direction of our learning comes from the identifications we form. We tend to identify with and incorporate the attitudes and values of our loved ones, including the teacher we like. Only in late adolescence does a person begin to realize in an objective way the value of formal learning. Thus normally it is only in adolescence or later that learning for learning's sake occurs.

If strong feelings or emotions such as hate, anger, or fear, enter into a human relationship they will impair or alter the process of identification. No one consciously desires to imitate and be like someone they hate. Thus these strong negative feelings or emotions may interfere with the learning process. Instead of developing a process of identification, the child develops strong feelings of alienation, and an alienated attitude if he feels too much pain, hostility or rejection.

F. Psychological Transference

Feelings, attitudes, and emotions that develop in one relationship or situation may be carried into other relationships or situations that the person or child perceives as similar. The child may be able to correct these misperceptions on the basis of the new experience; or he may ignore the reality aspects of the new relationship. If he ignores the reality aspects of the new relationship or new situation we say he has developed a "neurotic transference". That is, he is transferring feelings, ways of knowing, and attitudes from his past life, into a new situation or relationship where they are no longer appropriate, and where they are maladaptive.

In neurotic transference the child may also attempt to provoke teachers or parent substitutes to treat him in a certain manner, a manner that he expects from his past experience or previous feeling patterns. He then ignores his provocations and focuses only on the adult's behavior toward him. He then uses the adults reactions to support his previous views, behavior, and neurotic transference patterns. If these views and transference patterns are negative they may then undermine the formation of positive identifications and the motivations to learn (from this person, e.g. child is "turned off".)

G. Conflicts Diminish Available Energy for Learning

Conflicts may be present in the child's environment and he may be the unintentional victim of these conflicts. If serious psychological conflict exists in the family over a period of time a child may be too preoccupied with his current survival and security to invest much energy in learning new material. If a child's significant human relationships and his security are threatened he may be too anxious, apprehensive, or fearful to attend to academic work. Compared to his security, formal school work is unimportant in his evaluation of his world.

Conflicts may be present within the child. These conflicts may result from identification with several different people with conflicting values, goals, or ideals. Internal conflicts may also be present from fear of punishment for forbidden behavior; yet a desire to act on the impulse and seek the forbidden gratification. Internal conflicts may also be present between instinctual drives and impulses, and the values of the people with whom the child identifies. The child's own conscience may be too severe or too critical because of unrealistic demands he places upon himself.

In general conflict should be viewed as a part of life. Conflict and conflictual situations are not to be totally avoided. Psychological growth comes from successfully mastering conflict situations, not from avoiding situations or relationships in which conflict is present. It may be appropriate to shelter a person from a conflict situation that they cannot master, or that will not contribute to their psychological growth, but will be distinctive to their self image as an adequate person. Thus children should not be given tasks, or assigned work if it is known to be beyond their level of skill or ability. Making us look stupid, or feel stupid does not help us grow, it only makes us angry, or makes us want to withdraw from the situation that cause us to look bad. Most of life is not 100% failure or 100% success. In mastering conflict, and mastering skills, we should not expect perfections, but rather work toward progressive improvement of skills and knowledge .

The onset of adolescence brings stronger sexual and aggressive feelings with which a person has to learn to deal. These instinctual feelings or drives usually cause increased internal conflict, may cause increased conflict with ones external world, and may cause a greater pre-occupation with one's self and one's body.

Conflicts may arise from: threats to one's security; threats to one's relationships; excessive anxiety, fear, guilt, shame, or depression; too severe a conscience; and/or increased sexual and aggressive feelings. All of these detract from energy available to a learning process. Psychological conflicts that are of short duration, and whose resolution aids psychological growth may aid the learning process. Long term or chronic conflict may drain us of available energy.

H. Learning Directly Involved in Psychological Conflict

Different parts of the learning process may be directly involved in neurotic or other types of conflict. A basic lack of trust in people may lead to resistance to incorporating their gifts of information into one's own psychological schemes. A hyper-alertness for environmental cues may cause distractability and impare one's ability to attend to material to be learned. Attention to only certain areas, or the use of only certain sensory receptors may block some types of learning. Inhibition of function on a psychoganic basis may include not only attention and a signals from sensory receptors but may also include inhibition of associations and motor functions as well. Imparements of motor function may include a wide range of speech and body movements. Psychological inhibition and constriction may involve information intake, association, and output in a general way, or be confined to only a small segment of one area of psychological functioning.

I. Inhibition of Learning

Inhibition of learning may be due to: 1) fear of failure or disgrace; 2) excessive anxiety; 3) fear of injury or rejection (if one is too successful in competition others may retaliate; 4) adverse parental attitudes; 5) certain types of learning being associated with roles that conflict with one's identity; 6) refusal to identify with a teacher; 7) negativism; 8) desire to avoid competition; 9) learning or curiosity being sexualized and therefore avoided; 10) passive aggressive traits and attitudes of stubbornness, obstinance, passive obstruction, and negativism may also lead to an inhibition of learning.

J. Suppression or Repression of Immediate Desires or Impulses

If children have never learned to put aside their immediate desires or feelings and attend to the demands of the external world they will have difficulty with formal learning. Some children have not learned how to tolerate frustration. Some parents feel guilty about frustrating their children and may be dominated by the child's infantile pleasure-seeking demands. A child reared by such parents is poorly prepared to work in the usual classroom. His tolerance for the anxiety produced by the refusal of immediate gratification will reduce his ability to attend to his lessons. The child who has been much indulged by overly permissive parents has developed distorted concepts of the world; of his own importance. Such a child usually has a poorly developed system of psychological defenses. Such children require kind but firm management in the school setting. Such children first have to learn that their desires are not immediately gratified as they occur. They also have to learn how to tolerate a degree of frustration and anxiety.

K. Disturbed Reality Relationships

If psychological or neurological factors are present of a kind and to a degree that cause the child to be confused, disorganized or disoriented he will have difficulty in learning. If in his struggle to adapt to his world the child finds reality too painful, confusing, or disorganizing he may then choose to withdraw from, avoid, or deny certain parts of reality. In an attempt to cope with his world, the child may use magic as in rituals; he may attempt to organize himself or his world in a more perfect way as in compulsive perfectionistic striving; or he may retreat into a world of his own making, a delusional world.

L. Defensive Operations, e.g. Level and Types of Psychological Defenses Used

If a child has developed only the primitive psychological defenses of withdrawal, avoidance denial, and projection available, he is poorly prepared to cope with the many conflicts he will meet in an educational setting. Major questions to be asked, and if possible answered, would then be: 1) Why does he primarily use these primitive defenses? and 2) How can more adaptive defenses be developed? These answers will reside in a thorough study of the child and his environment.