

HOW CHILDREN MANAGE FRUSTRATION AFFECTS ABILITY TO FOCUS AND LEARN: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

by Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph.D.

Children begin to construct strategies for coping with frustration in their early years. Every day, whether they are aware of it or not, parents influence how their children deal with frustration. Indeed, parents have many opportunities during their children's early years to advance or hinder their lifelong ability to cope with frustration. Educators and health care professionals also have opportunities to inform parents about child-rearing practices that help their youngsters manage frustration constructively. Children who learn how to cope successfully with frustration are more likely than those who don't to become adults who live satisfying lives.

The ability to tolerate frustration has important implications for learning. By its nature, the learning process brings children into challenging situations that create anxiety and frustration within them. A child needs a foundation of emotional security to take the risks that are necessary to engage the unfamiliar individual steps required to learn new subject matter or gain a skill.

If a young child must regularly experience unmet developmentally appropriate needs, the youngster often will acquire a brittle emotional posture of fear and/or anger. In a variety of ways, the child will show anxious concern.

Unable to say it in words, the young child's searching glances, agitated body movements, emotional outbursts, and other behavior pronounce these messages: "I am in need." "I am uncomfortable." "I am scared." "I feel angry." If children must endure a pattern of deleterious parenting practices, at the first hint of frustration they become more demanding and inflexible. If normal developmental needs are consistently frustrated, children create a variety of defense systems to avoid stress and discomfort. These children, preoccupied by anxiety, do not have the resilience to make the attempts required for learning. For a child, to attempt is to risk.

A child will not be emotionally fearful and on guard if a trust that loving care will be provided to meet needs has been achieved. A stability develops over time that instills an inner felt security. Unthreatened by feelings of want, children develop an emotional flexibility, and as a result, can successfully tolerate new and different experiences. The child also can accept periods of mild strain, without crippling anxiety or fear. As a result, with trust and without fear, risks necessary to learn can be taken.

Secure Children Risk and Learn

Along with a sound emotional foundation engendered by a predictable and secure environment, parents should allow their children opportunities to exercise their curiosity, explore, and make attempts to overcome challenges and learn. From birth, children can learn gradually to tolerate and overcome frustration.

An infant's senses and interest are awakened when she hears sounds from a brightly colored rattle held within reach. The infant becomes occupied with feelings of curiosity and desire, but also experiences feelings of frustration. If her attempt to reach for the rattle is successful, the child learns thereby that she can act to satisfy curiosity and desire. More importantly, the infant learns to tolerate the frustration that accompanies wanting but not having, and striving to obtain.

When the same child at six months old is sitting on the floor and notices an interesting toy across the room, she simultaneously is filled with an excited desire to have the toy and

distress and frustration from not having it. However, with courage rooted in a brief life history of tolerating both desire and its accompanying frustration, she decides to risk it. She crawls toward the toy. She continues to feel both excitement and frustration as she nears it. When she reaches her goal and is able to grab the toy, she is happy and satisfied. The significant lesson she has taught herself is as important as her happiness. She has learned once again that she can invest herself, tolerate frustration, and achieve a desired goal.

Some parents subvert their child's self-assertion and undermine the child's ability to take risks and overcome frustration. For example, one type of parent would have noticed the child crawling toward the toy and interfered with her efforts by taking the toy to her. Giving the toy to the child would have denied her the opportunity to pursue her own goals, and thereby to teach herself to tolerate frustration. This parenting style can prevent children from developing trust in their ability to feel; tolerate; and by their efforts, overcome frustration.

Another type of parent would, as the child crawled toward the toy, move the toy farther from the infant. These parents overwhelm the child with too much frustration. They do this by taking control over the play away from the child and making achievement more difficult and less risk worthy than the child expected. This can cause loss of motivation to learn. Also damaged are the youngster's feelings of efficacy and self-trust. Challenges to the toleration of frustration are an inherent part of a child's self-chosen play experiences.

Educators and health care workers have opportunities to improve the learning climate by helping parents and other adults to recognize that making mistakes is an essential part of the learning process. Our culture is often very critical of people who make mistakes. This is especially true when those mistakes are made by children and adolescents. Self-doubt and the fear of personal inadequacy often are created in a child when adults enact culturally derived, negative attitudes toward mistakes. An adult's caustic or demeaning reactions to a child's mistakes can inhibit that youngster's motivation to take the risks essential to learn a skill or acquire knowledge. The ability to focus on a learning task is affected by the parent's responsiveness to the youngster's physical, emotional and social needs.

Felt Threat and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Children must create ways to distract from or defend themselves against painful anxieties. These distractions allow the child to cope. Some typical behavior patterns children use to cover up and distract themselves from their anxieties are silly or aggressive behavior, excessive talking, acting out, procrastination, daydreaming, passivity, and withdrawal. The purpose of distractions is to create a pseudo-existence that masks disturbing anxieties. Although these defenses help the child avoid and/or cope with painful feelings, they interfere with organized learning attempts.

To learn, a child must be able to focus. To focus on a learning task, children must be able to quiet themselves emotionally and physically. Focusing on a specific learning task requires choosing not to pay attention to other internal or external stimuli, but instead to calm themselves so they can focus on the learning task. Children who have suffered a disturbing psychosocial life with overwhelming frustration will find they come into direct contact with their painful feelings and anxieties when they try to calm themselves. They distract themselves from this characteristic, noxious anxiety when they begin to feel anxious. The act of focusing requires the child to sacrifice the very defenses that have been self-protective. This is a risk that an anxious child is unwilling or unable to take. For the most part, these children neither choose not to focus nor to distract themselves. Their defensive reactions become like reflexes and are automatic. For these children, focus-based learning is threatening. The child, therefore, runs away from

organized learning. These are dynamics that cause attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

ADHD behavior is symptomatic. Rather than relying primarily on drugs or behavioral techniques to ameliorate symptoms, attempts should be made to diagnose and relieve the cause(s) of the ADHD behavior. Drugs cover up symptoms, and therefore make accurate diagnosis and long-term remediation difficult.

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