

School

CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL THAT ARE PROBLEMATIC FOR THE ATTACHMENT DISORDERED CHILD

1. The primary focus of school is to impart information about the external world. Children with Attachment Disorder (AD) are focused on keeping themselves safe as they see it. The school's objectives will truly engage the child with AD only in those moments when *the child perceives the information to be relevant either to his immediate desires or longer-term survival*. Otherwise, learning is usually of little interest to AD children - it is just another of the adults' annoying agendas.
2. School typically expects students to organize their behavior around *external* factors, such as the schedule and curriculum. This clashes with the AD child's behavior being almost solely based on *internal* considerations.
3. Much of the motivation for participating in school rests on assumed desires to interact collaboratively with others and to foster one's own individual growth and learning. These factors carry little weight in an AD child's thinking.
4. Many of the activities in a school setting are group-based. Having to deal with multiple people simultaneously increases the chances of stimulating the AD child's anxiety, which will lead to behavioral attempts to re-establish a sense of control.
5. Most of the sources of gratification offered by school (parent and teacher approval, public recognition of achievement, grades on tests / report cards) are delayed gratifications. AD children's relentless focus on gratification in the moment, and distrust of the future, leaves these gratifications stripped of most of their appeal, and hence, un motivating in the end.
6. School demands performance, and AD children usually don't perform on others' terms. Refusal to perform is one method AD children will use to demonstrate to the teacher that they are not under the teacher's control. This parallels the AD child's refusal to show affection at home on the parents' terms.
7. TEACHERS have a dual role: that of the dispenser of "educational goodies" (instruction / information, attention, recognition for effort / achievement, granting requests, etc.) and that of limit-setter. This dual role will inevitably conflict with the AD child's personal priorities sooner or later. As occurs at home with parents, no matter how many times a teacher has been an ally / support to an AD child in the past, the first time that teacher blocks the AD student's desires, all those past occasions will be forgotten and the teacher will be instantaneously transformed from an ally to a persecutor in the child's eyes. *AUTHORITY which the AD student sees as unfair, deserves no respect*; and so now the AD student will feel entitled to be disrespectful to

such a "morally bankrupt" authority figure.

Because teachers must deal with the numbers presented by a classroom, as opposed to a family, the authority of teachers can appear even more arbitrary and persecutory than parental authority. When teachers set limits for the greater good of the whole class, this will seem more arbitrary still, as AD children have no conception of "the common good".

Understandably, teachers may feel attacked and unappreciated themselves at these moments, and because these feelings can run very strong, it is tempting to react. Reacting, however, will only worsen the situation, for the AD child will see the reaction as "evidence" that the teacher is, in fact, a punitive authority figure out to get the child.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL THAT THE AD CHILD "WELCOMES"

1. One of the primary defensive maneuvers that AD children rely on to maintain their psychological safety is that of *projection*. The many people present in the school context offers the AD child an abundance of targets for their projections. Because of their hypervigilance, AD children are generally quite perceptive of others' vulnerabilities and skillful at striking at those vulnerabilities with their projections. This can make the projections seem very believable to the receiver which can put that person on the defensive.
2. In general, teachers change every year. This provides a model of "short term attachment" which makes minimal to no demands for emotional honesty and intimacy. This circumvents AD children's area of greatest vulnerability thereby avoiding provoking much of the problematic behavior typically seen at home. This can lull educators into seeing the AD child as more functional than is truly the case.
3. School / home split: AD children frequently seek to pit school vs. home in the spirit of dividing and conquering the adults. Typically this takes the form of attempting to set the teacher up as a preferred parental figure and may go to the point of asking the teacher to adopt them away from their parents. These approaches can be quite seductive in their presentation and teachers need to be aware of not forming an opinion of the parents based on such interchanges with the child.

School Behavior Problems

BEHAVIORS COMMONLY DISPLAYED BY AD CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

Temper tantrums: AD children are quite capable of full-blown temper outbursts at school. Such outbursts can consist of any or all of the following: screaming, shouting, throwing objects, use of obscene language, verbal threats, physical threats, physical aggression, and running out of the classroom and sometimes all the way out of the building. Such extreme outbursts usually indicate that the child's anxiety has escalated, and the outburst

is a desperate attempt to ward off the perceived threat. AD children can get to this level of anxiety in as little 1-2 minutes if they perceive a danger of sufficient magnitude.

The onset of behavioral difficulties with an AD child in the school setting can be very rapid and often without any "seeming apparent trigger". However, there is always a trigger- it just may not be very apparent. It often takes both close observation and "thinking on one's feet" to figure out some of these triggers. The more a teacher figures out about an AD student's triggers, the more effectively that teacher will be able to work with that student.

Regressive behaviors: AD children can exhibit a wide range of immature behaviors in the classroom, including: use of a babyish voice, crawling around on the floor, curling up under furniture, pretending to be an animal, noisemaking, perseverative verbalizations, speaking nonsensical language, making graphic sexual and / or excretory remarks, giddyish forced laughter, and others. These regressive behaviors usually signal an upsurge of anxiety in the child, and they function both as a way to get away from the anxiety as well as to remove the child from the teacher's immediate control which serves to lessen the child's anxiety. Though these behaviors can appear bizarre, they usually do not mean that the child is psychotic at that moment.

Nuisance behaviors: These are frequently occurring minor infractions (such as interrupting or asking excessive questions) that disrupt the simplest of everyday interactions. These nuisance kinds of behaviors serve a dual purpose. First, they serve as ongoing reminders that the AD student is not under the teacher's domain. Secondly, they are "probes" that the AD child sends out into the environment to acquire information about the situation. From others' reactions to these "behavioral probes", AD children begin to piece together who is punitive and who is supportive; who will respond and who will ignore; who has a short fuse and who has a longer fuse, etc. The AD child uses the responses to his probes to figure out how to "work" the adults. When the AD child feels confident that he knows how to maneuver the teacher, the "honeymoon" will be over.

Provocative behaviors towards peers: AD children are deliberately provocative towards peers for a variety of reasons. Peers are vulnerable to react, and AD children will see the reaction as proof of their power to control others. Peers will need support and suggestions from adults to learn to minimize their responsiveness to the provocations. Provocative behavior, from an AD child towards peers, is almost impossible to eliminate solely by working with the AD child.

Teacher instruction: AD children often accept curriculum instruction from the teacher on an erratic basis. One day, the AD student can be focused, taking in information and on-task. The next day, he may seem completely unworkable, which can appear as "spaciness", "forgetfulness", "distractibility", calling out, outright defiance, or complaints of boredom and disinterest. Usually this fluctuating pattern of receptiveness to instruction is one more way the AD student seeks to remind the teacher that he doesn't readily submit to outside authority.

AD children presume to know the teacher's intention in assigning work: it has nothing to do with learning. To the AD child, academic tasks are given out simply as a way to control the child, keep her quiet, and prove to her that the teacher is in charge. Task completion is usually a reflection of how secure or insecure the AD child feels at a given moment. If the child feels confident about her control, then "yielding to the teacher" by doing the task won't be a problem. However, if the AD child isn't feeling so in control, then she is apt to choose to resist the task in order to "defeat the teacher".

Work production: The AD child most often either refuses to do assignments outright or does them in a haphazard, perfunctory manner. Occasionally, these children will apply themselves and often turn in a credible product when they do so. These seeming "lightning bolts" of intelligence, motivation, and effort are generally all too appealing to the adult world of teachers and parents; and that is precisely their purpose. The AD child dangles these moments of production in front of the adults to tantalize them into a game of trying to figure out what to do to get the AD student to perform like this more often. Taking this bait and entering this game is exactly like stepping in quicksand. The more the adults struggle to get the child to perform, the deeper the adults sink into the muck. Meanwhile, the AD child is "laughing all the way to the bank".

Understandably, teachers and parents often view the AD child's unpredictable work production, despite having the ability, as pure stubbornness. This is partially correct, but there is more going on than just stubbornness. This is just one more part of the AD child's 24 / 7 need to maintain control to feel safe.

The AD child's never completing work on a consistent, longer-term basis serves a self-protective function for the child in addition to its maddening impact on the adults. By not turning out enough work so that it can be measured reliably, the AD child cleverly avoids having to confront the disturbing reality that there is ability, knowledge, and power greater than his. In keeping his true ability elusively un-measurable, the AD child can keep his personal illusion intact that he is the smartest, most knowledgeable in the room. Protecting this belief in school is critical for the AD child to maintain his cornerstone belief that he has the ability to be in control of all people in all situations in all places.

Support / Praise: AD children commonly have one of three responses to receiving support and/or praise in the school setting: 1) accept the support without any clear overt reaction; 2) reject the support outright, and 3) accept and then denigrate the support. The AD student will recycle these three responses in an unpredictable sequence that defies any pattern. The teacher is left in the uncomfortable position of never knowing what will come back should support / praise be offered. Meanwhile, the child strategically creates the appearance of being immune to praise and support which is yet one more aspect of retaining control.

AD children rarely, if ever, express any gratitude for offers of support, as gratitude implies dependence and dependence is seen as dangerous by the AD child. Knowing this up front can be a buffer for teachers against feeling unappreciated and resentful when their extra efforts go unrecognized by the child.

School Interventions

INTERVENTIONS: WHAT DOESN'T WORK

1. Traditional problem solving questions such as: What happened? What was your part in it? What could you have done differently? AD children will learn to spin off the "desired answers", but they will be meaningless answers. The time spent on this exercise will be wasted time.
2. Vague praise, such as "you are handling things well today" is generally seen by the AD child as a manipulative control strategy on the adult's part. In addition, overt praise for expected basic behavior such as sitting in

one's desk is likely to provoke an oppositional switch into the undesired behavior.

3. **Conventional behavior management plans / level systems:** Such plans are based on consistency, and this consistency makes these plans easy targets for the strategic thinking of an AD child. AD children will see a behavior management plan, not as a way to change behavior, but as simply one more thing to learn "*how to work*" for their own purposes. Their movements up and down the levels has all to do with *their* own purpose at any given moment and little or nothing to do with success / failure or earning adult approval. AD children may even use behavior management systems as bait to draw the adults into useless discussions about how to sustain progress. The end result can be that it is the teacher's behavior, rather than the child's, that ends up getting "managed".
4. **Consistent zero tolerance stances** run a high risk of dragging the teacher into a cycle of escalating misbehavior followed by increasingly severe consequences. Zero tolerance also does not allow the teacher sufficient creative flexibility to approach the AD child in a useful way that the AD child could not predict.
5. **Believing the child's tales** about horrendous treatment at home by parents and offering support and sympathy in an effort to "compensate". In the case of an AD child, this is probably the worst possible thing an educational professional could do.
6. **Challenging the AD child's perspective** with "*objective evidence*" in order to persuade her that her thinking is somehow incorrect. This approach assumes that the teacher and child share a common view of "*reality*"- not true. The teacher's view will make little or no sense to the AD child. In fact, the AD child is apt to see this approach as a manipulative attempt on the teacher's part to set the child up in some way.
7. **Setting the parents up** to be the "heavies" by leaving it to parents and home to impose consequences for school infractions or work not done.
8. **Teachers taking AD children's behavior or statements personally.** This usually takes some practice as AD children are skilled at discovering adults' tender spots and going after them.
9. **Reacting emotionally** to AD children's behavior. This only reinforces the AD child's sense of being in control of the adult's emotions (a goal they generally pursue). This really takes some practice as AD children's behavior can be relentless, day in-day out, as any parent can testify.
10. **Looking for THE answer.** There is no "The Answer". "The answer" leads to doing the same thing the same way every time. An AD child will have a field day with such an approach.

INTERVENTIONS: WHAT DOES WORK

1. **Being somewhat unpredictable on purpose.** Such unpredictability is necessary to get past the AD child's vast array of avoidance maneuvers. An adult an AD child can predict is an adult an AD child will "*work*".
2. **Make some rewards absolute and not contingent on anything.** This effectively subverts AD children's strong tendency to sabotage themselves and thereby prove to the adults that they can't "make them succeed". (Example: AD child participates in a "fun Friday" activity regardless of their behavior, barring any safety concerns). This approach puts the child's succeeding under the complete control of the teacher.
3. **Drilling in the concept of "choice".** *Choice* is an idea that is often absent in AD children's thinking. It is not simply that they refuse to accept responsibility- the ideas of people making choices and having responsibility literally makes no sense to AD children. They need to have it pointed out to them, matter-of-factly, over and over, that they are making choices all the time. Then discussion can begin to move towards making better vs. worse choices.
4. **Approach AD children with a matter-of-fact, firm, no nonsense, not hostile, tone of voice.** Directions should be phrased as directions, not questions (Example: "Do..." vs. "Would you...").

5. **Four questions never to ask AD children:**

Did you...?
 Why did you...?
 Do you remember...?
 What did you say?

AD children can compose eloquent answers to adult questions that mean absolutely nothing. A question to an AD child is too often an invitation to trick an adult., It works much better to phrase statements as guesses and let them react to the guess. (Example: rather than "Did you break your pencil ?" try "I think you broke your pencil to get out of doing your work."). AD children's reactions to guesses will tell you much more than their answers to questions.

6. **Keep praise very concrete and specific and do not connect it substantive rewards.** Use humor to deflect AD children's attempts to be deliberately provocative.
7. **Teachers should follow the parents' lead in matters of behavior management.** Parents will almost always have seen behavior far in excess of anything the school will ever see. This gives parents irreplaceable experiential knowledge about working with their child's behavior. The school needs to partner seamlessly with home and parents in order to undercut the AD child's considerable strategic wiliness. However, school and home should be kept separate in some matters. Incidents at school should be handled at school and not referred to the parents to provide consequences at home in the evening unless this is part of a collaborative plan arrived at beforehand. In general, parents **SHOULD NOT** be expected to be intimately involved with nightly homework. AD children will simply use "homework" as a stage to play out their attachment related conflicts and everyone loses.

8. **Use of the word "*trick*" to describe AD children's strategic behavior works better than the more loaded words like "manipulative", "lying", etc.**
9. **Become a good observer of AD children's nonverbal responses (facial expressions, body position and movements, eyes, voice tone, etc). These are the most accurate signs of what is going on inside the child. If you listen only to what AD children say, you will go in circles repeatedly, getting nowhere.**
10. **Act as historian for the AD child. As AD children live in the moment, they need adults to remind them of past events that have gone successfully to help them maintain more perspective on the present.**