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# Treating the Bright Child with Learning Disabilities: Social and Emotional Problems in the Classroom and with Peers

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During the many years that Community School had the privilege and advantage of the daily guidance of our founder, Dr. Beatrice Lieben, the philosophical foundation of our practice was laid down. Her approach to teaching and treating the bright child with learning disabilities was imparted to her devoted staff in hundreds of endlessly patient lectures, examples, demonstrations, case studies and case guidance sessions with classroom teachers. It may be presumptuous to assume that such extensive theory on the social problems of learning disabled children can be distilled in one brief article; never the less, we are going to attempt to do so now. Here, in short, are the main insights and

teachings of Bea Lieben on the school related social and emotional problems frequently found in the LD population.

Social and emotional problems in school fall roughly into three categories: problems relating to 1) underlying dysfunctions, 2) discouragement, and 3) age appropriate developmental challenges. Children with disabilities in learning are often children with disabilities in behavior. It is now widely recognized that the effects of particular disabilities *on behavior* have even greater consequences than *on academics*. Since behavior operates in the social arena it is a public affair and determines in large part whether one is accepted or rejected by others. Impaired behaviors interfere with good social interactions

and contribute greatly to feelings of hopelessness about the self.

School based professionals deal with disrupting behaviors in a variety of ways. At Community School we provide an environment designed to reduce external stress so that internal stress can be dealt with more successfully. High structure, small groups, firm discipline with consistent, built-in consequences, and an incentive system to encourage effort are helpful for better mobilization of resources. Such strategies reduce restlessness, distractibility and the effects of poor organization.

For more individualized problems such as a tendency toward explosiveness, lying or rage, Bea urged us to develop in the children a cognitive awareness of these underlying propensities. We also attempt to develop in them sensitivity to their inner condition and to the social scene, in order to evolve with them a program for ameliorating the effects of behavioral dysfunction. For example, explosiveness may be a consequence of poor expressive language, preventing more rational attempts to express dissatisfaction and to influence the environment. Children are encouraged to "listen" to their inner condition, to assess the scene to determine their ability to deal with it, and to recognize the alternatives available for more rational approaches.

Lying may be a consequence more frequently of poor memory for self-behavior, for the behavior of others and of poor recall of the order in which events occurred, than of a deliberate effort to deceive. Understanding this, children can enter more readily into practice sessions for accurate recall of past events. Incidences of rage may relate more to perseveration in the emotional realm than to inappropriate anger over a minor event. Here, a minor irritation may continue to mount unchecked into full rage. If children understand this propensity, they can learn to "listen" to their inner growing agitation and learn to "break" the mounting emotions. Many

such problems in behavior lend themselves to resolution when guilt and blame are removed and children are involved in the process of planning a program for change.

Some good examples are the very common problems of easy frustration, quickness to anger and the pattern of giving up when faced with a stress situation. For most of us, stress or challenge results in a mobilization of resources to resolve problems. For many of our LD children, however, the tendency is for disintegration of inner resources rather than for their mobilization. In the 1930's Kurt Goldstein labeled this behavior the 'catastrophic response'. This is not a response relating to motivation but rather a response of an organism feeling extremely vulnerable and experiencing a pervasive sense of threat. In one recent experience, a young student at our school arranged for a playdate at his home. He invited a classmate for a Saturday afternoon. At some point the classmate began to engage in a bit of mild teasing. This was so unacceptable a betrayal to our young host that he began to cry, sobbing uncontrollably. The playdate ended in a shambles and the child's mother reported that that the sobbing went on for several hours. The child would love to have a close friend but is unable to cope with the social interplay.

Easy frustration, quickness to anger and 'falling apart' under stress are all signs of vulnerability, underdeveloped control mechanisms and underlying dysfunction. When the propensity for the catastrophic response is recognized by the child as well as by the teacher, parent or therapist - if it is seen as an innate tendency rather than a faulty attitude - then all can be involved in the ways of helping the child to deal realistically with a built-in problem he doesn't want and for which he is helpless to change.

Other problems relate to discouragement. Profoundly discouraged children often evolve self-defeating behaviors to prove their value and

significance. Such behaviors, first expressed by Alfred Adler, include withdrawal into stupidity and incompetence as a way of gaining concerned attention and of avoiding the responsibilities of failure, attention-seeking behavior such as clowning and boasting to gain needed attention if only in negative ways, negativism, criticality and challenge to authority to prove one's effectiveness as a person.

Some children resort to physical means to demonstrate their power. These tend to be children who have difficulty expressing themselves in clear, fluid language. They simply do not possess the verbal facility and the ready language to make themselves understood. The use of force, of dominance, substitutes for language and is an expression of feelings of impotence. Such children need help in developing confidence in their ability to manipulate events in rational ways. We can help them to do this with appropriate, focussed instruction in language. The development of skills, which play such a large role in the development of self-esteem, is the route to achieving more socially acceptable ways to deal with conflict.

In general, by ignoring the goals of self-defeating behavior and, at the same time, attempting to meet bona fide needs, we can do much to reduce such behavior. For example, attention seeking will probably diminish if it is largely ignored and the wanted attention is given when there is absolutely no bid for it. Challenge to authority will diminish when there is avoidance of confrontation by the teacher, a spelling out of choices and their consequences and the placing of responsibility for behavior where it rightly belongs - in the hands of the child. In general, these alienating behaviors diminish as children learn they can learn, that they are competent, lovable and accepted as worthwhile persons.

Some problems relate to the developmental challenges appropriate for age. Expressed concerns seem to cluster around issues such as boy-girl relationships, how to form more enduring peer relationships, how to become part of a social group, independence strivings that conflict with parental authority and vocational possibilities. Regularly scheduled, structured class group discussions and small, informal same-sex conversational groupings are helpful for airing concerns, sharing experiences and peer evaluations of proper and improper behaviors and attitudes. Some of this material is covered in our sex education classes.

To the above ends we have added a number of innovative programs to our curriculum. Quite some time ago we introduced the Social Problem Solving and Decision Making Program devised by the Rutgers psychologists Drs. Elias and Clabby to formalize instruction and practice in "listening to their inner conditions" and choosing the right solutions. More recently at the lower school we have organized several small therapy groups whose goal is to help students deal with their aggressive tendencies. A wider program offered initially at the fifth and sixth grades is called Unlocking Learning Power. This weekly class attempts to make children aware of the nature and scope of learning disabilities and teaches strategies to cope with its consequences.

At our high school we offer each student a Social Issues curriculum which addresses issues that concern teenagers. These are discussed in small group sessions led by a teacher/mentor whose role is to lead and facilitate the discussion. They help students deal with important social issues and assist them with any problems, concerns, questions and general needs that the students may have involving school or school-related issues. The mentor also acts as an advocate with the school administration. Each incoming freshman is also given a mentor to help them

with the transition into the high school. By combining Social Problem Solving and mentoring, the Community High School provides students with options and alternatives in problem situations.

In the area of psychosexual development, children with learning disabilities appear to experience the appropriate sexual thrusts for age and development, but their proper expression tends to be hampered by naiveté, poor social judgment, poor control, craving for affection and an impatience with procedures for establishing more enduring relationships. Girls often learn of their feminine power for male arousal and make blatant and indiscriminate use of it. Boys appear to be more helpless victims of their own sexual thrusts and the seductive signals given out by the girls.

The Internet is now presenting us with a new kind of challenge. Some of our technically proficient students have discovered “Chat Rooms” and spend many hours on the Internet. Young boys in our program attempt to make contact with girls and young women, hoping to develop a social relationship with them. The consequences of these contacts can be very serious, emotionally, for these naïve, affection crav-

ing young boys. One physically mature, though emotionally fragile and experientially limited sixth grader in our school presented himself as older to a teen-aged girl on the Internet and became increasingly obsessed with the contact. When she caught on and dropped him, he was devastated. He could hardly bear it. There followed much emotional “mopping up”, both at home and in school. The boy was flooded with guilt, shame, embarrassment and rejection.

The developing adolescent needs information and help in meeting these challenges. The informal conversational grouping can be quite effective in sorting out emotions and also allow for adult guidance in improving social language and the conversational manners so lacking in the learning disabled population. Younger children need understanding and the use of appropriate strategies by parents and teachers if they are to be helped with their trying behavior. Research has shown that behavioral problems often endure long after academic problems have been resolved. We hope that, with increased understanding of the behavior and increased skills in dealing with it, these research findings may soon be reversed.

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