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# READING AND THE WITHDRAWN CHILD

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The emotional state of a poor reader may provide important insights into the causes of the child's reading problems. The teacher can attempt to find the source of the reading problems by observing the child's behavior and by determining the child's emotional stability. Once a diagnosis has been made, the teacher can begin a program of remediation with the goals of emotional stability and reading progress in mind.

Children who withdraw from academic activities and social interaction can severely retard their reading development. Many children with emotional problems tend to withdraw; therefore, the teacher must be aware of the causes of withdrawal and the characteristics of the shy, withdrawn child.

## Causation

Many children withdraw as a result of happenings in the home. Naturally, the family provides the foundation for the social and emotional development of the children. Parents are interested in helping their children with school work; but "many parents are unskilled in teaching specific reading techniques, and emotional tensions may arise which affect both parent and child" (Russell, p. 579). Consequently, the seemingly insignificant incidents in the home can have lasting social and emotional effects on the young child — perhaps causing her/him to withdraw.

Broken homes have become increasingly common in our society. In fact, more than one million homes were broken by divorce in the United States in 1975 (U. S. Bureau of Census, p. 68). Excluded from this figure, of course, were separations, desertions, and other breakups which did not result in divorce. There is no question that a broken home puts a burden on a young child. As a result of a divorce, the child may lose physical and emotional contact with one or both parents. The effects of this loss are compounded if the child does not understand or accept the reason behind the breakup of the marriage; and, though unfortunate, many children do not understand why they are deprived of natural parents and a normal home.

However, the child from a broken home may be more fortunate than the child who is physically and emotionally abused by her/his natural parents. Statistics of abused children are overwhelming. In 1975 there were 46 million children aged three to seventeen living with both parents; of this number, it was estimated that at some time during their lives, 3.1 to 4 million children were kicked, bitten, or punched, and 1.4 to 2.3 million

were beaten up (Brenton, p. 51). While the physical aspects of this type of abuse are easily recognized, the more serious emotional effects are often difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, the abuse can have drastic emotional effects that can severely impair the child's ability to function normally in the classroom.

Although not being physically abused, the child may have other problems that produce emotional upheavals. The parents may put excessive pressure on the child to achieve at an unrealistic level. As a result, the child could feel inferior and could withdraw from academic activities and peer relationships.

On the other hand, the parents may have a *laissez-faire* attitude and show no interest in the child's school work. The child may become distressed if her/his parents do not praise her/him for successes or show concern when academic problems are encountered.

The relationship with siblings is also a possible basis for the child's withdrawal problem. Unjust sibling rivalry and the resultant feelings of inferiority and inadequacy may have tremendous effects on the child's emotional stability. Too often, parents praise the child who excels and condemn the child who falls short of academic excellence. Some parents tend to show more love for and greater acceptance of an academically successful child.

Children may become withdrawn as a result of the school setting. Teachers, whether knowingly or not, often show favoritism toward certain children. Whereas, other neglected children may be the ones who actually need the most support from the teacher. Also, the teacher may put undue pressure on children to achieve beyond their abilities. The teacher may "try to force the child to adjust to the curriculum rather than adjusting the curriculum to the child" (Bond & Tinker, p. 139). Therefore, the teacher may be the cause of the problem s/he seeks to eliminate.

Competition from classmates may be viewed as an extension of sibling rivalry, and thus the child's feelings of insecurity continue to be fostered from grade to grade in school. This is certainly true if the teacher allows and encourages unfair competition to take place in the classroom. The teacher should not indulge in "such practices as having all students in a group read the same book at the same time, having all in a group learn the same skills at the same time, and labeling those who do not learn in the specified time as failures" (Wilson, p. 66). The less adept child could feel inferior, unsuccessful, and could withdraw if s/he were forced to compete with academically superior peers.

Society, as a whole, can also cause its younger members to develop deep emotional disturbances. The tempo of modern living in the United States is possibly faster than it has ever been. Everyone is urged to keep up or be lost in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. There seems to be no place for the laggard or the normally slow child.

Today's society is characterized by materialism. The economically disadvantaged child may feel severely inferior when others are praised for their toys, clothes, or other possessions. The child can react in an extreme

manner by withdrawing completely from contact with others, therefore avoiding a comparison with them. If society continues to be materialistic, children from poorer environments will continue to suffer emotional stress.

Being pushed to perform at an unattainable rate and level, the slow learner is unable to bear the pressure put on her/him by parents, teachers, and peers. As stated by Smith and Johnson, "Children who are unable to meet their parents' or teachers' expectations in reading have a reading problem" (Smith & Johnson, p. 33). Therefore, the fast pace of school and society may directly impose additional stress and strain on the already frustrated child. Under these conditions, the child is apt to have emotional problems which can cause her/him to withdraw.

#### The Withdrawn Child

There are several specific characteristics that identify a withdrawn child:

1. The child feels inferior or insecure, and withdraws from group and other socializing activities.
2. The child indulges in fingernail biting, fidgeting, pencil chewing, and other overt manifestations of anxiety and tension.
3. The child stutters and uses a high-pitched voice when reading.
4. The child has unreasonable fears and feels unsure, rejected, perplexed, and embarrassed.
5. The child feels that s/he has few if any friends; and, thus feeling socially isolated, the child clings to the teacher for emotional support.

After recognizing that the child is withdrawn, the teacher is faced with the task of trying to solve the child's problem. Naturally, the teacher must examine her/his own behavior to insure that s/he is not the source of the child's problem or does not contribute to it. In other words, the teacher should be part of the solution and not part of the problem. Although unable to do anything about the child's home background or the effect that society has on the child, the teacher can change or manipulate the classroom environment to minimize emotional stress and maximize good experiences. There are some definite actions that the teacher can take to deal with the problem:

1. The teacher should be impartial and not show favoritism. Professional responsibility requires that the teacher accept the unacceptable, love the unlovable, and, perhaps, tolerate the intolerable.
2. The teacher should encourage self competition through self-evaluation. The child should use her/his previous performance as a measuring stick to gauge present success; this would be a meaningful, realistic assessment of growth. The child should be aware of her/his academic progress, and the teacher should capitalize upon every opportunity to develop this awareness. A good maxim for this situation would be "nothing promotes academic growth like the knowledge of scholastic achievement."
3. The teacher should not pressure children to achieve at levels beyond

their capacities. Although the teacher should be an eternal optimist in assessing potential, s/he should use discretion in determining attainable levels of academic excellence. However, the teacher must have and express expectations beyond the children's current levels of achievement to activate a rather potent tool in teaching – self-fulfilling prophecy.

4. The teacher should not force a child to perform tasks that could result in feelings of inferiority. A peer audience puts additional pressure on the child. A child who loses her/his status in front of peers could withdraw from future academic and social activities. It would be far better for the teacher to tutor the child before the performance of the task, thus insuring the child's success. Even our best professional athletes get their "act together" prior to a public presentation.
5. The teacher should "reduce frustrations by selecting materials at the child's interest and reading levels and by relating reading activities to the child's goals" (Carter & McGinnis, p. 179).
6. The teacher should determine the impact of the classroom atmosphere on children. If the teacher can create "an atmosphere free of the irritations and critical attitudes which have caused his [the child's] tensions, the disturbed child will usually make progress in his reading" (Gilliland, p. 70). The shy child must be given security. Above all, the teacher must provide warmth and understanding in fair proportions to all children, especially to those children who are withdrawn.

#### Summary

Many teachers overlook the child who is withdrawn. This is natural because the withdrawn child creates no disturbances, and her/his presence is hardly noticed. But the withdrawn child is not getting full benefit from the educational program, and the teacher must establish a plan for alleviating or eliminating the child's problem. The teacher must have a high degree of patience when working with this child. Moreover, when the child is withdrawn and emotionally unstable, the teacher must build emotional stability by showing a genuine concern for the child's academic growth and personal welfare. Ultimately, through teacher concern and action, the child will make optimum progress in meeting the challenge of becoming a competent reader.

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