

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND SCHOOL FAILURE – Part I

Why are so many children failing in school? What turns students off to school and aborts learning in children of varying ability levels? Thirty years of research has yielded conclusive evidence that a learned response is at the root of the problem. This research points to a need for a different perspective to find the solution. It makes clear that we have been neglecting the psychological reasons why students fail and refuse to learn despite the best efforts of educators to motivate and teach.

The national report by the Commission on Reading describes these students as “listless and inattentive and sometimes disruptive. They do not complete work. They give up quickly when faced with a task that is difficult for them. They become anxious when they must read aloud or take a test. A good summary description is that they act as though they were helpless to do better.” The report further states that this sense of helplessness is affected in some subtle ways by parents’ and teachers’ behavior.

As educators and parents, we most often see these children as passive and afraid to try. Effort to them seems futile, and they give up trying. These students develop self-defeating strategies that eventually lead to the very failures that they are attempting to avoid. They strive for unattainable goals, they procrastinate, and they accomplish only tasks that require little effort. They are depressed, and a form of depression in children is anger. They feel that they are “too stupid” to learn so why try. These children have learned helplessness.

The concept of learned helplessness unites educational and psychological research into a workable solution. It offers an answer to the frustration that is confronting the child, the parent, and the educator. Basically, learned helplessness creates three basic deficits in the child—cognitive, emotional, and motivational—which destroy the child’s desire to learn. The motivational deficit stops learning by aborting the child’s initiation of responses. Too often we say the child is not trying, but research shows that these children have learned to be helpless to learn. It is not a moral choice. The learned helpless child believes he/she has no control over the learning process, and, after many failures, the child gives up trying because it hurts too much to try. It is a cognitive deficit in that it is a learned conditioned response. Mere exposure to uncontrollability is not sufficient to make the child helpless, but the child comes to expect that failure is inevitable. In addition, in learned helpless children there is cognitive debilitation and a decrease of logical perception and thinking. The emotional deficit leads to depression and lowered self-esteem. Depressed children may have problem behavior that they express through anger, aggression, running away, stealing, truancy, and other rebellious acts.

Learned helplessness is a conditioned response because it is learned rather than rational. There was certainly nothing intrinsic in the sound of a bell that should have aroused the taste buds of Pavlov’s dog. It was a conditioned response, just as these children have a conditioned response to turn off after failure.

This learned response or behavior operates to stop thinking processes in the same way as pulling the breaker switch or a power outage disrupts the electricity from getting to the lights in your house. Just as the power outage must be traced and repaired, so the source of children’s failure to learn must be understood and remediated or else no significant learning will take place. Children in this condition do not remain

neutral but are actively developing maladaptive systems of responses to learning. The longer the child is in this situation, the greater the number of times the child will have practiced inappropriate responses, day after day, year after year. Such children are building highly practiced inappropriate response systems. They cannot actively process their own way back to normal response patterns. They keep trying, the teacher keeps trying, but the response system is like a huge snake wrapped around the child or a ball of twine that gets more knotted with each effort to untie it. This becomes the child's habitual, automatic way of thinking, which is referred to as explanatory style by some psychologists. Explanatory style is the manner in which you habitually explain to yourself why events happen.

Remediation of learned helplessness is like a three-legged stool. All three legs are necessary to help the child. It is necessary, first, to adequately understand the components of learned helplessness to remediate it. Second, we must help children discover the root beliefs and the distorted perceptions they create that cause their self-defeating deficits. Third, we must give children the tools to *change* and refute their distorted beliefs and thereby *reduce* the deficits.

Learned helplessness is a very different concept from what parents and educators are used to dealing with. However, because it centers on children's thinking as the basis for feelings and behavior, it is nonetheless powerful. Martin P. Seligman, the author of *Learned Optimism* (1990), says that "The cure for learned helplessness is not the rediscovery of positive thinking. It does not consist in just learning to say positive things to yourself. Positive statements alone without first clearing out negatives have little if any effect. **What is crucial is what you think, changing the destructive things you say to yourself when you fail or have setbacks and making these statements a part of your explanatory style.**"

Seligman says a person's explanatory style develops in childhood. By third grade, the child already has an optimistic or pessimistic style of looking at the world. This style has its roots in the mother's (or predominant parent's) explanatory style, but is shaped by criticism from parents, teachers, and other adults. It is also formed from negative life crises, such as death, divorce, and unresolved fighting in the family. What goes on in a child's life at home, in the community, and in school has an effect on the child, for there is no neutral reaction. These experiences can create a negative explanatory style in the child and, if intervention does not occur, it will determine the child's future reactions to all situations and particularly to learning. "When a child is doing poorly at school, it is all too easy for his teachers, parents and others to conclude falsely that he is untalented or even stupid. The child may be depressed and learned helpless and this learned behavior may be preventing him from fulfilling his potential" (Seligman).

Further, Seligman says that there are three crucial dimensions or kinds of causes to the explanatory style: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization. It is the permanency of the causes to which individuals attribute bad events that shape their expectations for future events and thereby determines the duration of their depressive episodes and deficits. Students who give up easily believe the causes of failures that happen to them are permanent. They feel that the failures will persist and will always be there to affect their achievement. This permanent expectation of failure creates their helpless symptoms and thus the deficits.

Students who resist helplessness believe the causes of bad events are temporary. Compare, “I failed because I’m dumb” to “I didn’t study enough.” Permanence is about time. Pervasiveness is about space. Pessimists make global or pervasive explanations for their failures and give up on everything when a failure strikes in one area. People who make specific explanations may become helpless in that one part of their lives, but they are okay with other areas. Contrast, “I’m dumb in school!” to “I don’t do well in math but I do all right in the other subjects.”

Personalization means attributing a failure to characterological causes such as “I am stupid.” This personalization causes low self-esteem and depression. A learned-helpless explanatory style is characterized by a predisposition to explain bad events by causes that are permanent in time, global or pervasive in effect, and internal or personal. Whether or not children learn in school is a direct consequence of their explanatory style. Students who believe that reading failure is based on lack of ability (a permanent condition) are convinced that they will have similar reading failure in the future and, therefore, are unlikely to make an effort to change that expectancy. If students see their reading failure as due to a lack of effort (a temporary and changeable condition) then they may see the possibility of changing this behavior. **Perception of ability has the most influence on the child’s effort.**

In a research project, Carol Dweck conducted experiments to observe how learned helplessness affected school children. She divided 4th grade students into “helpless” and “mastery-oriented” groups depending on their explanatory style. All were given unsolvable problems followed by solvable ones. Once the “helpless students” failed, their strategies deteriorated down to 1st grade level, whereas the “mastery oriented students” stayed at 4th grade level despite failures. They rolled up their sleeves and worked harder. The crucial element was whether the student saw the failure as having to do with ability or effort. Learned-helpless children see failure as permanent (ability not effort), pervasive (in everything they do), and very personal.

The first thing to do to change the destructive things you say to yourself when you experience the setbacks of life is to learn how to recognize the automatic thoughts that are going through your consciousness when you are feeling bad. This is true for both adults and children. Children are not aware of their automatic thoughts because they have become habitual. Unless the child looks specifically and honestly at them he/she will not be able to dispute them. So we teach children to be “thought detectives.” It is not our thoughts but theirs that must be changed. They must learn how to recognize these thoughts when they occur and dispute them. These children are changing their inner dialogue, and therefore their explanatory style, through methods that teach them to see failure as effort, not ability. This is called cognitive-behavioral training.

This process is not easy and takes time and patience, but it can change the child’s life. We offer some suggestions on how to do this in a second part to this article. Also, we have recently written a book titled *The Turned-Off Child: Learned Helplessness and School Failure*, published by American Book Publishing and available through Publisher Direct at www.pdbookstore.com. Our book takes you step-by-step through the process of remediating learned helplessness. It was written to help parents understand and help their children to learn and to give educators and others working with children a different perspective on why some children are turned-off to school.

References:

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