LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND SCHOOL FAILURE – Part 2

What is learned helplessness? Learned helplessness is a conditioned response to failure that creates cognitive, motivational, and emotional deficits in our children. The power and force of remediation must be as strong as the power and force of the past conditioning for any effective remediation to take place. Also the plan of remediation must fit the particular individual child to be effective. Just as a doctor has to prescribe the right antibiotic, the teacher/parent/therapist must prescribe the appropriate method of utilizing these techniques or their usefulness will be dissipated.

In the first part of this article on learned helplessness, we described remediation of learned helplessness as a three-legged stool. First it is necessary to adequately understand the components of learned helplessness to remediate it. This cannot be stressed enough, for without understanding the problem and its depth not only will the problem not be remediated but the child may be insulated against future help and remediation.

Second, we must help the child discover the root beliefs and the distorted perceptions these beliefs create and that cause the child's self-defeating strategies. Martin Seligman in *Learned Optimism* points out that to just say positive things to children without first clearing out the negative things they say to themselves will not work. It is like trying to put a Band-Aid on the measles. The third leg of the stool is to give to the child the tools to change and refute the distorted beliefs and thereby reduce emotional, motivational, and cognitive deficits.

A child's past failures largely condition him/her to perceive future challenges as threatening and destructive events. To change this failure-evoking perception we need to change these expectancies. Therefore, fundamental to all remediation of learned helplessness is the need to change the child's causal reference to failure, which drives his/her expectancy to fail. In other words, teach the child to restructure or reroute the conditioned responses by giving the child tools to perceive these responses as distortions and refute them. It is these tools we hope to introduce to you now.

Changing a child's inner belief system is not easy. The Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky once said, "A new philosophy, a way of life, is not given for nothing. It has to be paid for dearly and only acquired with much patience and great effort." This is why we as adults need to model the techniques we want children to learn. This shows the child the steps and gives us a sense of the problems and challenges involved in learning the process.

So how do we help the learned helpless child change his/her distorted beliefs about failure? As teachers and educational therapists we have found that careful use of cognitive-behavioral therapy and Seligman's ABCDE method have been very effective. We integrate these two methods into the following techniques: metacognition (thinking about thinking), modeling all behaviors we want learned, changing the child's self-talk from negative to positive, providing the child with a different rationale for his/her failure, learning how to problem solve, learning how to handle mistakes, changing the child's locus of control, and learning how to self-regulate and self-evaluate.

It is impossible in one short article to go through all these techniques completely, but let us at least introduce the ideas to you. Cognitive-behavioral therapy for children has five steps to help children change their thinking. (1) Teach children to recognize the

automatic thoughts going through their consciousness when they are feeling bad. (2) Teach children to dispute the automatic thoughts by gathering evidence to the contrary. (3) Teach children to make different explanations called reattributions and use them to dispute their automatic thoughts. (4) Teach children to distract themselves from the thoughts that depress them. (5) Teach children to change unrealistic, demanding assumptions to realistic, flexible ones.

An application of cognitive-behavioral therapy is Seligman's ABCDE method. The A stands for adversity. Adversity can be almost anything negative that happens—for a child it might be a frown from a friend, a low grade on a test, or something negative the teacher says. B stands for beliefs. The beliefs are how the adversity is interpreted. They are the automatic thoughts that go through our minds when an adversity, or what we think to be an adversity, has occurred in our lives. It isn't the adversity itself, but it's the child's perception of the threat of one and the failure expectations that he/she brings to this threat. C stands for consequences. We have the child write down or tell us and we write down what happened, the thoughts that went through his/her mind when it happened, and what action the child felt like doing because of these thoughts. For example, an adult yells at the child, the child feels stupid and thinks that he/she can never get anything right, so the child wants to run away and hide. One of our students felt that doing math was an adversity. She felt that she was dumb and could not do anything involving numbers. When it was math time she felt sick and wanted to go to the restroom or to the nurse's office.

The D and E stand for disputation and energization. We teach children to gather evidence as to why something isn't true. They are their own defense attorneys, and their pessimistic over-reactive beliefs are on the stand. We have the children consider alternatives. Maybe in the case of the teacher yelling, he/she had had a bad day and was yelling at other students too. It was possible that the teacher didn't understand that I had a problem and perhaps it would be good for my mom to talk with the teacher about the problem. For the student afraid of math we play games involving numbers and role playing (such as being a waitress in an ice cream parlor) to reduce her fear and gradually built up her math skills.

Another one of our students was having problems in math and with relating to others. He needed to see something concrete to generalize from in order to change his distorted explanations. One day we took him to the pizza parlor where he saw a spot by the light fixture. He thought it was a listening bug and felt angry that everyone was watching and listening to him. When we all moved over to see the fixture closer he saw that it was merely a screw holding up the fixture. With our help he was able to generalize to other distorted causal assumptions and refute them. This helped him to understand how misconceptions could distort his causal thinking, and this perception literally changed his life.

One of the first things we do as educational therapists and in the classroom in working with learned-helpless children is to give them a different rationale for failure of problems in school. They are most likely saying to themselves, "I must be dumb if I can't do as well as the other kids do." We turn off the lights and ask the child, "Does this mean there is no more light?" The student will say, "No, the light went off because you turned off the switch." We then tell him/her, "There is a switch in your head that you turned off because you didn't like what was happening in school. We are going to help

you turn on your switch!" When children see that they failed because they turned off their brain switch, they change their rationale for failure from "I'm dumb" to "I turned off my switch." Years later, we have met students from our classes and they will ask, "Hey, Mr. and Mrs. G. is your switch on?"

Another very effective technique is to have the child put on our large adult-sized shoes and try to move in them. We did this with one of our students while he was trying to play basketball. He found that he couldn't move quickly and was missing shots. When asked, "Does that mean that you are not a good basketball player?" he replied, "No, it just means that the shoes are too big." He had a different rationale for his inability to play basketball. Later he was able to apply it to his reading, and when he came to a word in his story that was too hard, he would simply say, "The shoes are too big." Whatever the problem may be, such as not seeing well and needing glasses, be sure that the child has a different rationale for his/her problems in school.

In working with children with learned helplessness, it is important to establish a non-threatening friendly environment—humor helps a lot. Children need to be desensitized to mistakes. We will say kiddingly that there is a pit of alligators under your chair or a bear in the closet and they are going to get you if you make a mistake. The whole idea is to eliminate fear of trying and growing. Therefore, making students more comfortable and confident in their thinking ability involves two objectives. First, we change their rationale for mistakes away from "I am stupid" to "I will have to try a different way of doing this." The second objective involves teaching and modeling for children how to handle mistakes. We tell students that a mistake can be your friend because it lets others know what you have yet to learn.

Another technique we use is to change the child's locus of control. This refers to the degree to which individuals view their successes and failures as either contingent upon their own behavior or independent of themselves. Passive/learned-helpless children view themselves as the recipient of others' control. They feel that they are not responsible for their thinking and for their behavior changes. The end result is that even though the particular behavior may change, it will not generalize to new situations and help the child to grow. The lack of control can also cause anger. While teaching at USC Reading Clinic, one of us had a student who was always angry and fighting. He would ask the boy, "Who is in control right now, you or your anger?" This would stop the boy, who would visibly shake as he regained control of himself and shout, "I am!" "Who's in charge?" is a good rallying cry that gets students open and excited about their new learning. Basically we all want to be in the driver's seat and determine the outcomes in life. We may not always determine the events that come to us, but we can determine our reactions to them and thoughts and feelings about them.

When working with children who have a hard time relating to their inner sentences and thoughts we like to start with Philip Kendall's problem-solving techniques as introduced in the *Stop and Think Workbook, Teaching Problem Solving to Students with Learning and Behavior Problems.* Problem-solving training teaches children how to think, not what to think. It teaches students to develop a systematic formula for organization of their thought processes. Similar steps work with interpersonal relations as well. (1) Identify and define the problem. (2) Question the range of possible response strategies. (3) Focus, consider, and clarify the consequences of the possible strategies. (4) Perform and solve the problem. (5) Self-evaluate the performance and either self-

reward or self-correct the problem. Once again children learn how to take control of their thinking and their actions. Children themselves should be involved in all aspects of their learning: the goal setting, the problem solving, the evaluation, and the rewarding for a job well done.

Every child knows how to do something that involves a process, whether it is sports, arts and crafts, or home skills. Let the child show you how to do something. Let him/her role play being the teacher. Using the illustration of basketball again, we had one of our students describe the five or six specific steps of shooting a basketball. One of the key features in the process is letting the ball roll off your fingers and flicking your wrist as you shoot. The student explained that this was how you control where the ball is going and how hard to shoot the ball. As the student taught us we were able to help him see the specific steps he needed to look at his inner thoughts and to get him involved in metacognition and problem solving.

According to Kendall, "Actual learning doesn't begin until students are doing a task on their own." The more an individual manipulates, elaborates, or transforms the information, the more likely he/she is to have a deeper understanding of the content and to recall that information. We have found that it is very effective to have parents and teachers verbally go through their thought processes as they solve a problem, thus modeling the steps. When modeling behaviors, verbalize and articulate the steps and have the child repeat the instructions. Then have the student verbalize the steps as he/she is working with you, helping when necessary. Be careful to be sure that children understand what to do before having them do it on their own.

We know we have just briefly touched on some of the aspects of remediating learned helplessness in children and eliminating school failure. We have written a book titled *The Turned-Off Child: Learned Helplessness and School Failure.* Our book is being published by American Book Publishing and is available through Publisher Direct at www.pdbookstore.com. We also plan to have a Web site to help you with problems you are encountering with your learned-helpless child. Remediating learned helplessness opens blocked channels of learning and rescues beautiful minds held captive to distorted causal perceptions. Martin Covington, in "Self Esteem and School Failure," says that students can be trained to compensate for lack of ability by direct instruction in the remediation of their causal perceptions about failures. We can change the child's whole life by turning the child on to learning.

References:

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