

WHY ARE OUR CHILDREN FAILING IN SCHOOL?

By Robert Gordon MS and Myrna Gordon MA

Are you bothered by the many students you see who lack motivation and don't seem to want to learn? Are you concerned about the large percentage of our children who are not learning in school? Statistics show that one third of the students who enter high school will drop out before graduation and many students with high school diplomas are barely able to read or write. The vast majority of students leaving our education system do not have the skills to earn a living in our increasingly technological society and international marketplace. What are we doing wrong? How are we failing our children? Could we not be looking in the right places to correct this problem?

Research shows that what is needed is not more money spent on education but an understanding of **why** children are turning off to learning and failing in school. We don't need more text books but rather a different perspective with a new approach. We have been trying to teach with out looking at the missing dimension, the psychological reasons why children turn off to learning. Bruno Bettelheim, world renowned child psychologist in *On Learning to Read*, pleads with us to look at the "valid" psychological reasons why students fail. He says, "Although there has been great concern about children's inability to read (learn) and how to overcome it, by and large there has been little sympathy for the valid psychological reasons why a child may passively resist or actively refuse to become literate, despite the obvious advantages that literacy offers." He adds that "**the missing component in educating the whole child is our lack of understanding why he doesn't want to learn.**"

This different approach to solving the underachiever's problem was discussed in *Cognitive Behavioral Psychology for Schools* by Alexander and Hare. They said that "To attend only to the cognitive or metacognitive components of reading (learning), without regard to its affective elements, is analogous to treating only part of a disease: The likelihood of a cure is greatly diminished." Lawrence Gentile, at a conference, said that "it is like trying to paint over the measles." **There is a missing dimension.** When we try to solve this problem by using only past methods without regard to the psychological or affective, educators are two dimensional while the underachiever poses a three dimensional problem. Students either turn-off to learning or they become rebellious and fight with everyone who tries to help them.

The research further conclusively proves that there is a psychological break down in student's strategies. This breakdown is a learned behavior and is known as learned helplessness. The application of the learned helplessness concept from the field of social psychology to education can be effective and useful as we have found out in over thirty years of successful teaching as classroom teachers, resource specialists and educational therapists. Our ideas and methods have been so well received that after lectures and articles on the subject we have now written a book, *The Turned-Off Child, Learned Helplessness and School Failure*.

Research into the concept of learned helplessness offers a new dimension and sheds new light on the non-achieving student. It shows that it is a symptom that one can develop through experience. It is preventable and also treatable. There is a desperate need for parents, teachers and therapists to learn more about it and to

understand this learning disability. Then we need to learn how and what we can do to help those children who are afflicted with it and are failing in school. The educational application of learned helplessness bridges the gap between education and psychology, cognitive and affective areas and brings a definitive understanding of this previously thought enigmatic problem. In essence, learned helplessness brings an insight into the why, how and dynamics of students motivation or lack to it. It also provides an umbrella and focus for many of the other educational therapies, strategies and remediations.

WHAT IS LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Learned helplessness is a learned behavior—a conditioned response. It is not a moral decision not to learn. Children with learned helplessness have cognitive, motivational, and emotional deficits because they have experienced so much failure, or what they think to be failures, in their young lives that they don't try. It hurts too much to try. They have turned off because in their minds that is the safest way to avoid failing. Their explanation for failure is, "I'm dumb" or "I can't do anything right." They feel that they have no control over the learning situation, so they either run away from learning or rebel against it. The concept of learned helplessness unites educational and psychological research into a workable solution. It offers an answer to the frustration which is confronting the child, the parent, and the educator.

The dictionary defines learned helplessness as refusing to take charge: somebody's failure to take action to make his or her life better arising from a sense of not being in control. According to Martin Seligman, in his book *Learned Helplessness*, "Learned helplessness is a state of inaction and depressions arising from a realization that one's efforts are ineffectual in attaining one's goals." Martin Covington, in *The Productive Thinking Program*, says simply that it is "Passivity resulting from repeated failures." The key words and phrases in all the definitions are **passivity, decreased interest and reduction in the initiation of responses, and depression**. Depression can be turned inward resulting in running away from the learning situation or into hostility where the student acts out in anger.

Learned helplessness usually occurs when a child experiences too many achievement failures. As a result, the child has a tendency to give up on a task easily once he or she encounters difficulty. Continued failure leads to the expectancy that all tasks are too difficult and the child gives up on school and eventually on having a pleasurable life. 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. There can be great dividends when the concept is understood and remediation is applied correctly. We need to realize that when the child turns off it is not due to a moral decision but a learned behavior. In a video, Goldstein, clinical psychologist for children with problems, says that we must determine whether a child's behavior is a result of non-compliance from a conscious choice or incompetence or inability. He said that for incompetence we should not use punishment but education.

It is important to understand that learning is an interactive process not a passive process that produces a product. It is a multi-dimensional discipline that involves a dynamic of interaction between the student's mind as he constructs meaning out of prior knowledge and through the various elements of the situation. When children experience repeated failures in attempting to learn they stop trying for it hurts too much to

try. Instead they turn to video/computer games and other activities in which they can achieve success and not feel helpless. In addition to feeling helpless children feel depressed, anxious, stressful and worthless.

Learned helplessness not only causes children to turn off but it creates within them devastating deficits in both their personality and in their academic achievement. It is important to understand these deficits and their effects upon the child in order to remediate them. Basically, learned helplessness creates three basic deficits in children – cognitive, emotional and motivational. The motivational deficit stops learning by aborting the child's initiation of voluntary responses. 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 must come to expect that failure is inevitable. In addition, there is cognitive debilitation and a lack of logical perceptions and thinking. The emotional deficit leads to depression and lowered self esteem. The longer children experience these failure situations the more highly developed their system of inappropriate responses becomes. **It is important to always remember that learned helplessness is a conditioned response and not a moral choice that the child has made.**

HOW DOES LEARNED HELPLESSNESS CAUSE SCHOOL FAILURE

When young children fail or are criticized they develop a negative causal perception of that activity. Many, many perceptions develop into what is known as the explanatory style. Martin Seligman, in *Learned Optimism*, defines explanatory style as the manner in which you habitually explain to yourself why events happen. We don't **always** explain things the same way, however, it is the way the child explains things in most situations that becomes his explanatory style. A person's explanatory style develops in childhood. By third grade, the child has already developed optimistic or pessimistic perceptions about 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. Everything that is said or that happens in a child's life that the child perceives to be negative either at home, in the community and/or in school can create a negative explanatory style. If intervention does not occur it will determine the child's future reactions to all situations and particularly to learning.

Seligman, in *Learned Optimism* says that there are three crucial dimensions 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 feel their failures are permanent and that they will always happen to them. On the other hand, students who resist helplessness believe the causes of 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. Also, people who make specific explanations may become helpless in that one part of their lives but they are alright in 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

not very smart.” 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. The students who believe that their failures in school are based on lack of ability (a permanent condition) are convinced that they will have similar failures in the future and, therefore, are unlikely to make the effort to change their expectancies. However, if students see their failures as due to a lack of effort (an unstable and changeable condition) then they will see the possibility of changing this behavior. Perception of ability has the most influence on children’s effort. Learned helpless children see failure as permanent (ability not effort), pervasive (in everything they do) and very personal. Seligman, further points out that changing these beliefs is not just learning to say positive things about yourself, it is changing the destructive, habitual, automatic things you say when you experience the setbacks of life. Without first refuting this negative thinking children can be insulated against further development.

Martin Covington, in his chapter on self-esteem and school failure, in the California report on self esteem, said that test taking (or any learning situation) involves a time-ordered cycle with several stages. As students move from one stage to another the psychological events within each stage are elicited by prior events and act as triggers for successive events. Further, he said, there is a (1) a sense of powerlessness due to the perception of lack of ability and (2) simultaneously there is an increased estimate of the importance of ability as a causal factor in success. This combination places failure prone students in kind of double jeopardy which results in learned helplessness. This explains students resistance to learn despite well intended and well developed teacher strategies. The results are a fully developed cycle: **Perception to Attribution to Explanatory Style to Deficit.**

Seligman also says, “When a child is doing poorly at school, it all too easy for his teachers, parents and others to conclude falsely that he is untalented (lazy) or even stupid. The child may be depressed and learned helpless and this may be preventing him from fulfilling his potential.” Think about this, Patricia Kramer, in an article in “*Self-Esteem Today*”, said that, “More young people today may be dying from a pervasive disease called helplessness than from guns, knives, drug and alcohol related deaths or suicide.” She further says that “studies indicate that when children enter school, 80% feel good about who they are; by graduation time - if they haven’t already dropped out – only 5% feel worthwhile or valued.” Students are learning to become helpless and not to learn. Parents and educators need to ask why and seek new solutions.

Once we truly understand the problem children are facing in school and look at these children in a different light, then we can work on ways to change their thinking about themselves. We offer some ideas and suggestions for remediation in our book *The Turned-Off Child, Learned Helplessness and School Failure*. To learn more about our book and our background we invite you to visit our website at www.turned-offchild.com. Our book is being published by American Book Publishing and also available on <http://www.pdbookstore.com>

References:

- Alexander, Patricia & Victoria Hare. "Cognitive Training: Implications For Reading Instruction", *Cognitive Behavioral Psychology in the Schools* edited by Jan Hughes and Robert Hall, New York, NY; Guilford Press, 1989.
- Bettleheim, Bruno and Karen Zelan. *On Learning to Reading*, New York, NY; Alfred A. Knopf, 1982.
- Covington, Martin. "Self-Esteem and Failure in School", *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*, edited by A. Mecca, N. Smelzer and J. Vasconcellos, Berkeley, CA; University of California Press. 1989.
- Covington, Martin; Richard Crutchfield and Robert Olton. *The Productive Thinking Program*, Columbus, OH; Merrill Pub Co., 1972.
- Gentile, Lance and Merna McMillan *Stress and Reading Difficulties*, Newark DE; International Reading Assoc., 1987.
- Goldstein, S. *Why My Child Won't Pay Attention*, Salt Lake City, UT; Learning and Behavior Center, 1991.
- Kramer, Patricia. "Hopelessness: The Most Deadly Disease of All" , *Self Esteem Today*. 1992.
- Seligman, Martin; Christopher Peterson and Steven Maier. *Learned Helplessness*, New York, NY; Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Seligman, Martin. *Learned Optimism*, New York, NY; Pocket Books, 1990.

About the Authors:

Robert and Myrna Gordon have been working with children for more than thirty years as classroom teachers, resource specialists and educational therapists. They both have their master's degrees and life credentials in special education, reading, elementary and secondary education. Robert taught at the University of Southern California Reading Clinic for seven years and was a mentor teacher. While they were both working at the Switzer Center for a year they began researching and lecturing around the country to packed audiences on "Learned Helplessness and School Failure". The lectures and articles they wrote on this subject generated so much response that they were asked to write their book "The Turned-Off Child".