

Unit Two

Causes of Behavioral and Emotional Difficulties

When one behaves badly or oddly, our tendency is to ask such questions as "what makes him behave that way?" "what on earth could he have been thinking to do that?" We want to know the causes of behavioral disorders often because we want to know whom or what to hold responsible for that act. This helps us how we might control it. Popular notions about the causes of behavioral problems usually contain elements of truth but are simplistic, ascribing nearly all of the faults to single factor. Whenever we describe behavioral problems/disorders we should look at a number of alternatives like

- ✓ It is the parents' fault because of the way they reared him/her
- ✓ It is the school and teachers fault because of the wrong way they handled him/her
- ✓ It is a neurological thing that she/he just cannot control
- ✓ It is the existing culture with its bad models

From this we can understand that behavioral disorders cannot be caused by a single factor rather a variety of factors can contribute the growth and development of behavioral problems.

Generally, causes behavioral disorders may involve the following

1. Biological factors
2. Family's child-rearing practices
3. Mismanagement at the school
4. Cultural factors

2.1. Personal/biological Factors

For the vast majority of children with behavior problems, there is no evidence of organic injury or disease. That is, they appear to be biologically healthy and sound. Some experts believe that all children are born with a biologically determined temperament that may not in itself cause a behavior problem rather it may predispose(influence) the child to the problem. Brain injury or dysfunction has a critical role for the development of behavior disorders-particularly for cognitive and attention problems.

Emotional and behavioral problems may be in part caused by a variety of biological causes including: complex genetic factors (inherited temperaments), malnutrition, traumatic brain injury and physical illness. However, biological factors are not the direct causes of specific behavior problems rather they work best in combination with environmental factors.

In short, although there are a number of possible biological causes of behavior problems, it is usually impossible to pinpoint a biological cause for a particular behavior problem. Hence, it must be concluded that there is little, consistent suggestive evidence, much empirical proof of a biological cause for most of children's behavioral disorders

The types of childhood behavior problems most frequently linked with suspected biological causes are:

- Hyperactivity which may be caused by diet and toxins in the environment
- childhood psychoses (autism and childhood schizophrenia)
- Limited attention span and low frustration tolerance which might be caused by impaired neurological growth or damage to the central nervous system
- Perceptual or language problems which might be associated with neurological dysfunction

2.2. Family related factors

Behavioral and emotional disorders often appear to “run in the family” this is because some people have speculated that if such characteristics are not genetically transmitted then they must be caused by family interactions.

Families with poor children rearing skills have always misbehaved children while families with excellent children rearing skills have always well behaved children. Argue on this statement by considering the experiences you observed from your locality. Undoubtedly children learn many of their attitudes and values from their parents and siblings. For example, a child's family unwittingly (without knowing) teaches his/her undesirable attitudes toward school and academic learning. For decades, it was known that a home environment lacking educational stimulation is likely to produce children who have learning difficulties. Similarly findings of research indicate

that parental discipline and other aspects of child rearing can contribute to children's emotional and behavioral problems. These include:

- ✓ Discipline that is too relax and too restrictive
- ✓ Parent hostility towards the child
- ✓ Inconsistent management of the child at home
- ✓ Child abuse and neglect
- ✓ Wrong disciplinary model or bad example at home
- ✓ Disorganization in the family
- ✓ Preferential child treatment

So, through the above practices/ experiences families can contribute to the development of either mild or sever emotional or behavioral problems.

Here it should be clear that although family factors may play a major role in children's emotional or behavioral problems, one can not exactly identify the family interactions that are at fault in the individual case. This is partly because the child's behavior can be a cause of parental behavior as well as be caused by it.

It should also be noted that teachers and others must be careful not to assume inappropriate behavior exhibited by a child is always caused by the family. It is possible for parents with extremely poor child rearing skills to have children who behave well. It is also possible for parents who are extremely competent in child rearing to have children who behave miserably/wrongly. Therefore, teachers and the school community must be ready to work with parents for the benefits of children instead of totally blaming parents for children's problems. There is strong consensus that behavior is largely shaped by the social context.

Selfe and Stow(1989) identified the following family factors for emotional and behavioral difficulties. These include:

- ❖ Basic needs being unmet(physical abuse and neglect), overcrowding or large family size, unsatisfactory housing condition and poverty.
- ❖ Marital discord/dispute or broken family

- ❖ Maternal depression/ neuroticism
- ❖ Child “in care” or absence of child care
- ❖ Lack of routines may mean that the child gets overtired or restless
- ❖ Prolonged separation from mother. This may slow down development and can lead to acute distress
- ❖ Domestic crises and parental disharmony
- ❖ Parental illness. This can adversely affect children if, through ill health parents are erratic or moody, or children are anxious about them.
- ❖ Unsatisfactory parental attitudes and practices. This means that children’s emotional development is likely to suffer if they are rejected or over protected or if parent discipline is inconsistent so that it is unclear what behavior will result in praise or reprimand/warning.

2.3. Immediate Socializing Factors

Children’s behavioral development is largely affected by a wide range of experiences. These include: interactions with peers and schooling.

2.3.1. Peer Groups

Opportunities to interact with peers are known to be important for normal development but relatively little is known about how much and what kind of interaction is necessary or how young children’s peer relations may be a cause of disturbed behavior. It might be expected that children learn wrong /appropriate behaviors from their peers but peer relations also hold great potential for behavior therapy.

For example peers may effectively improved disturbed children’s behavior through playing, tutoring, modeling (providing examples that disturbed child may imitate) or by giving reinforces for desirable behavior as directed by an adult therapist.

2.3.2. School Factors

Certain characteristics of schooling in some cases are causal factors for behavior problems and hence teachers and school leaders must be aware of and ready to change those school experiences that may instigate troublesome behavior. That is before looking to other causes, teachers and school leaders should first make certain that a student school experience is not contributing to emotional or behavioral problems.

To this purpose teachers should often ask the following six questions about their behavior, the classroom or the school to assess whether the educational environment might be contributing to students misbehavior (Stow and Selfe 1989):

1. Is my instructional program sound?

A sound instructional program is the first defense against emotional or behavioral problems in school. That is, implementing good instructional strategy is useful to minimize behavioral problems. Instruction offered at the student's feeling of threat, failure, resentment and defeat is not successful.

We should not expect students to behave well if they are not being taught well. In this case students often do not see the relevance of the skills they are being taught in the school. If they see what they are being asked to do a waste of their time, they are likely to behave inappropriately in protest, primarily out of boredom or frustration. One of the teacher's tasks is to teach skills that are important to student's lives and to find ways of making "uninteresting" skills worth students' time to learn sometimes by modifying teaching methods, learning activities, using relevant teaching aids and sometimes by giving meaningful rewards for learning.

2. Are my expectations of students appropriate?

Expectations that are too high or too low for student's ability usually caused misbehavior among students. That is expectations that are too high for student's ability lead to constant feelings of failure on the other hand expectations that are too low lead to boredom and lack of progress. A good teacher adjusts expectations to fit the students' level of ability so that improvement is

always both possible and challenging. Getting the expectations just right is not a small task, but this fundamental task, if not accomplished, is certain to cause misbehavior.

3. Am I sufficiently sensitive to the student as an individual?

A school environment that is conducive to appropriate behavior must allow students sufficient freedom to demonstrate their individuality. Teachers who demand strict uniformity and who are unable to tolerate and encourage appropriate differences among their students are likely to increase the tendency of some to exhibit wrong behavior. Hence, making balance between conformity to necessary rules and tolerance for differences is a key to building a school and classroom environment conducive to appropriate behavior.

4. Do I offer reinforcement expertly?

In many cases, students with emotional and behavior problems are ignored when they are behaving well and given lots of attention (usually in the form of criticism, reminders and threats) when they misbehave. This kind of treatment usually aggravates the student's emotional or behavioral difficulties. Thus, classroom teachers should give expert reinforcements frequently, immediately, interestingly and contingent (dependent) on desired behavior. To give an expertly reinforcement, it must be given in combination with other behavior management strategies for maximum effect. These other strategies include: careful instructional programming, knowing when and how to ignore misbehavior, using non-violent punishment and discussing with students in ways that enhance their self-confidence and self-control

5. Am I consistent in managing behavior?

One of the most significant features of a good school experience for many students but especially for student who exhibits behavioral problems is a high degree of structure.

Good classroom structure means:

- ✓ Making instructions clear to the students
- ✓ Holding good and firm expectation for every student
- ✓ Taking consistent consequences for behavior

When the student is being managed consistently, the classroom routine and the consequences for behavior are highly predictable. In short, inconsistent classroom management is one factor that increases student's tendency to misbehave.

6. Are desirable models being demonstrated and used?

School children and adolescents are great imitators. If the teachers' behavior is a desirable model for students, then students may develop appropriate conduct. Students also imitate their classmates' behavior. Therefore, being a good model behavior and developing good model behavior peers in the classroom is vital to minimize behavioral problems.

Stow and Selfe (1989) mentioned the following as a "difficult school environment" which contribute to emotional and behavioral difficulties:

- ✓ A large number of untreated and maladjusted students
- ✓ Unstructured environment, that is, deficient management with poor communication between staff
- ✓ A number of staff who are unsympathetic(uncaring) to children
- ✓ Support services not used
- ✓ Absence of school liaison(link) with parents
- ✓ Lack of curriculum choice
- ✓ Inadequate remedial assistance
- ✓ Poor moral among teachers and lack of trust
- ✓ Erratic/inconsistent use of sanctions or disciplinary measures
- ✓ Absence of good behavior model
- ✓ High staff turnover
- ✓ Lack of good teaching-classes out of control

2.4. Cultural Factors

Families and schools have profound influences on behavior, but the behavior of children and youths is also shaped by the standards, values and expectations of the large culture they live. Some of culture related factors that affect emotional or behavioral characteristics of children

include: mass media, neighborhood, religion, social group, and social class. Cultural influences may contribute emotional or behavioral problems, particularly if there is conflict between cultures or if a given culture gives youngsters missed message. A considerable amount of research suggests that watching TV violence encourages young children to develop aggressive behavior and decreases desirable responses, such as imaginative play.

Children's behavioral development is also influenced by the media, for example,

- ✓ The type of films they see
- ✓ The magazines or news papers they read