

The Elephant in the Classroom: Psychosocial Issues Affecting Learning

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What are psychosocial issues?

Factors that arise from:

- Family functioning
- Peer interactions
- Problems with internal regulation of emotions
- Can affect other areas of life, including classroom learning

Common Psychosocial Issues

- Familial Stress
- Traumatic Stress
- Bullying
- Anxiety
- ADHD
- Depression/Mood Disorders

Familial Stress

- Domestic Violence
- Verbal Conflict
- Family Stress due to
- Job loss
- Financial pressures
- Other circumstances

Can lead to

- Family Disorganization
- Emotional Unavailability
- Decreased supervision

How to Help

- Build in opportunities to connect with parents (pick-up, drop-off, back to school night, etc.)
- Build community among families through family events, opportunities for family socialization
- Offer support opportunities, such as parenting and stress management classes

Traumatic Stress

- Abuse/neglect
- Natural disaster
- Family illness or death
- Accident or incidence of violence

ACUTE STRESS DISORDER (DSM-V)

- Presence of nine or more of the following from any of the five categories:
 - Intrusion symptoms
 - Recurrent, involuntary and intrusive memories of the event (can be repetitive play in children)
 - Recurrent distressing dreams about the event (or any nightmares in children)
 - Flashbacks
 - Intense reactions to triggers of the event
 - Negative Mood
 - Persistent inability to experience positive emotions
 - Dissociative symptoms
 - altered sense of reality
 - inability to remember
 - Avoidance symptoms
 - Efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts or feelings about the event
 - Efforts to avoid external reminders
 - Arousal symptoms
 - Sleep disturbance
 - Irritable behavior/angry outbursts
 - Hypervigilance
 - Problems with concentration
 - Exaggerated startle response
- 3 days to 1 month after trauma exposure
- Not attributable to effects of a substance or other medical condition
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder has almost identical criteria, but is diagnosed after one month following the trauma

When children show signs of traumatic stress

- Keep routines consistent to the extent possible.
- Give children a safe space to talk and to express feelings.
- Report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect

Some ideas to encourage expression of feelings

- Art supplies like crayons, paint, markers, colored pencils, clay or play-dough.
- Construction toys like Legos, blocks, etc.
- Toy cars, buildings, small action figures; dollhouse and dolls
- Sensory tables with sand, water
- Forts, tents, etc.
- Prayer circle
- **The key is creating the opportunity; don't force the expression.**

Bullying

- Signs of Bullying
 - being suddenly fearful or avoidant of school (or other places where the bullying might be happening)
 - becoming depressed or withdrawn
 - sharp decline in academic performance
 - low self esteem or negative self-statements
 - signs of physical altercations (e.g., unexplained bruises or scrapes, torn clothing)
- When kids are victims of bullying
 - Ask them
 - Determine what (if anything) might make them a target
 - Teach assertiveness and bully-resistance skills
 - Encourage the child to make friends with other kids who don't bully
 - Work together with parents

Anxiety

- Rise in childhood anxiety disorders since 2001
- Watch for these signs:
 - Extreme or atypical separation fears
 - Vocalized worries
 - Restless, disorganized activity
 - Frequent nightmares
 - Physical symptoms of stress
 - (headaches, stomachaches,
 - difficulty sleeping)

Sample Anxiety Accommodations

- Seating within classroom
- Signal when giving directions
- Class participation
- Class presentations
- Answering questions at the board
- Testing conditions
- Small social groupings for lunchroom/recess/unstructured activities
- Safe person
- Cool down pass

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

- Inattentive type
- Impulsive/Hyperactive type
- Combined type

Strategies for Accommodating Children with Attention Challenges

- Quietly and discreetly speak beforehand with children having attention problems and ask them to “work together” with you to watch their behavior and participate in the day’s activities. Let them know you are confident they can do it.
- Set goals together with children who are struggling and follow up with them after the session for feedback on how they are doing.
- Agree on a signal or code word you can use with the child with attention problems to redirect his or her attention during the session. This will allow you to give reminders without embarrassing the child.
- As much as possible, seat children with attention problems away from high-distraction areas and near the teacher.
- Provide directions in more than one sensory modality (i.e., offer a written “checklist” of steps in word or picture form when providing verbal directions).
- Check for understanding after giving directions e.g., Say, “Who can tell me what you need to do first? What’s next?”).
- Integrate movement into group activities as much as possible. Provide positive reinforcement for on-task behavior. Verbal praise, “points” or coupons for earning privileges or small tangible items can be effective incentives.
- Be enthusiastic, and keep moving as you speak to the class. Your energy and enthusiasm will attract the attention of the learners.

Depression/Mood Disorders

- Low energy
- Lack of motivation
- Inattention/distractibility
- Agitation/Anger management issues
- Somatic complaints
- School avoidance

Interventions for Depression/Mood Disorders

- Cool off space
- Safe person
- Referral for cognitive-behavioral therapy
- Affective education
- Cognitive restructuring
- Pleasant events scheduling