

# Emotional Disturbance among Primary School Children

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**Abstract:** *Some adults exhibit different degrees of emotional disturbance which negatively affects their relationship with spouse, children, colleagues and other members of their social circle. Disturbingly, such attitudes would have been identified and ignored by their teachers at primary school level when it could have been much easier to manage than in adulthood.*

**Keywords:** Emotional disturbance, Primary school, children, Aggressive, Withdrawn

## 1. Introduction

In reality individuals exist emotionally, at different points in the continuum between severe maladjustment and perfect adjustment. A primary school child can be placed anywhere along this continuum. Though „normal individuals“ are seen as perfectly adjusted, „emotionally disturbed individuals“ are seen as severely maladjusted. As a statement of fact, everyone has emotional ups and downs. Hence, an emotionally disturbed child may sometimes appear normal and a normal child could also appear emotionally disturbed [1].

In the words of [1], a pupil is considered emotionally disturbed based on the behavior exhibited, age of the child and the presence of an observer. On the behavior exhibited, a pupil who responds to any frustration in dealing with his peers by striking out physically may be considered emotionally disturbed. On the age of the child who exhibits a behavior, a pupil who cries because of hunger is more likely to be considered emotionally disturbed than another who cries because he/she was scolded. On the presence of an observer, the issue of whether the child is emotionally disturbed or not will not arise if no one is observing the behavior of the child. In short, for a behavior to be considered abnormal, it must affect either the person exhibiting the behavior or one who is in contact with the child.

Specifically, emotional disturbance (ED) is the term used to describe the category of special need and class of exceptional children whose consistent behavior is considered unacceptable and capable of endangering not only their growth and development but that of others [1,2]. Though sometimes denied by parents and seen as a burden by teachers, this condition which is of two (2) types; aggressive and withdrawn, requires the modification of these pupils classroom conditions, as well as the services of guidance counselors to enhance the early identification and management of ED among individuals. Identification of ED among primary school children is paramount because when exhibited in adulthood, it brings about embarrassment and affects all-round communication of the individual [1,3]. The areas that could be affected include relationship with spouse,

children, colleagues and other members of the individual's social circle.

It is imperative for teachers to understand the problem of ED among pupils because they are the first to suspect that pupils have undiagnosed ED. This will help them to closely observe and take up other responsibilities which are often limited to guidance and counseling, since early identification will facilitate early initiation of management for the ED.

## 2. Definition

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in [2] defined ED as a condition that involves the exhibition of one or more of the following behaviors to a marked degree and over a long period of time, to the extent that it adversely affects a child's educational performance leading to:

- Inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors
- Inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationship with peers, teachers and others
- Inappropriate types of behavior or feeling under normal circumstances
- General pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
- The development of physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems“.

## 3. Classification

ED among children can be classified into two main categories, namely; withdrawn and aggressive children. Moreover, both may either be mild, moderate or severe in degree [1,2].

### a) The Withdrawn

A child is said to be withdrawn when the child is mentally and socially alienated to the environment. In such case, the child is often unwilling and afraid to participate in social and intellectual activities going on in the classroom, even though he/she is not mentally retarded. Hence, the pupil exhibits non-goal oriented but self-stimulating behaviors like arranging, disorganizing, and rearranging things. On observation, withdrawn pupils are seen to stay alone, play alone, work alone and associate with none of their mates.

Unfortunately, this group of children is often neglected in schools because they are too quiet to disturb anybody. Yet, their behavior interferes with their own growth because they refuse to interact with their environment and so, do not learn.

#### **b) The Aggressive**

The aggressive child rushes from one thing to another, engages in non-goal oriented, non-self directed and even out-right purposeless activities. Such child moves around unnecessarily disrupting, beating, and fighting other children. They may also display unnecessary excessive anger with everybody, everything and even themselves (a characteristic of temper tantrums). Also, such pupils take out their problems on other children and are constantly drawing attention to their self. Aggressive children learn little or nothing from objects, activities or events, and where they learn at all, they seem incapable of using earlier knowledge in acquiring new ones, because they do not recognize cues or the guiding principles offered to assist them to learn.

#### **Characteristics (symptoms and signs)**

There is no uniform behavior among emotionally disturbed children, but it is known that each of them exhibit one or more of the following behavior consistently within their environment which may be the home, school or society [1,3].

1. *Show of aggression* which includes biting, fighting, hitting, kicking and the use of vulgar languages
2. *Truancy* because of marked dislike for school and school routine
3. *Destructiveness* for both school and home materials
4. *Excessive carelessness*, hence they loose their belongings quite often and may be tempted to steal from other children as a replacement in order to avoid the scolding of their parents and teachers
5. *Shabby and tattered dressing* as a result of the frequent involvement in aggressive behavior which leaves them with torn and dirty clothes
6. *Poor attention* because they shift excessively from one assignment to another
7. *Withdrawal* and refusal to interact with the environment
8. *Hyperactivity* which makes them run about excessively
9. *Hypoactivity* which makes them work alone
10. *Expression of unnecessary fears*
11. *Very poor self concept* that leads them to set unrealistic goals for themselves.
12. *Egocentricity*
13. *Domineering attitude* which makes them unpopular among their peers, who isolate them instead
14. *Tamper tantrum* which refers to unnecessary and excessive anger with everybody, everything and even themselves
15. *Inability to maintain satisfactory relationship* with peers, siblings and teachers
16. *Lack of self-control*
17. *Lack of self-confidence* which keeps them always dependent on others for assurance before venturing into new activities
18. *Pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression* even in situations where other children are excited.

#### **Causes**

A child is a product of both inheritance and his environment. Hence, the cause of ED could be biological or social. Both are rich in factors that can upset a child emotionally [1,4].

#### **1. Biological Factors**

Biologically, ED could be traced to genetic, neurological or biochemical factors in a child or to a combination of these. Which ever, it inhibits the child's performance in school which in turn makes the child to either become withdrawn or aggressive in dealing with people.

#### **2. Social Factors**

The social factors include; family, school and societal factors.

#### **a) Family factors**

The family factors include unhealthy parenting style, parental deprivation, unproportional love, unhealthy parental relationship among parents and institutional child rearing.

#### **1) Unhealthy parenting style**

The child rearing pattern adopted by parents greatly determines the child's emotional stability. The healthy parenting style is the democratic parenting where the democratic parents try to strike a balance between the autocratic and the permissive parenting styles. They control their child's behavior to conform to that which the society wants, while at the same time, giving freedom for the child to exercise judgment and learn his own way of doing things without going contrary to the norms. This allows such children to develop self control, be independent and grow up to be emotionally well adjusted.

Contrarily, some parents adopt unhealthy parenting styles like autocracy and over-permissiveness. Some parents adopt autocratic method which is characterized by excessive domination and control of children's behavior without allowance for freedom. Hence, such children grow up lacking self-control and feeling unsecured when left alone. This coupled with the feeling of forced obedience could lead to show of aggression against the parents and other elders including teachers for forcing things on them.

Some other parents are over-permissive, giving excessive freedom to their children, without any or sufficient attempt to control the behavior of their children. Hence, they grow up to be disobedient because they were not trained in the act of exercising self-control and accepting responsibilities demanded by the society.

#### **2) Parental deprivation**

ED can result from parental deprivations. Depriving a child some of the basic needs of life like food, clothing, love, affection and school materials, makes the child see his parents-child-relationship in the negative. This leads such child to grow up poorly adjusted emotionally.

**3) Unproportional love**

ED can result when parents show unproportionate love for selected child(ren) at the expense of others, thereby creating unhealthy rivalry, jealousy or aggression towards the loved child.

**4) Unhealthy parental relationship among parents**

ED among primary school children can result from tensions generated by unhealthy relationship between parents. Particularly when children watch their parents fight, become separated or totally divorced. A child that sees all these aggressions displayed will grow up to be aggressive himself.

**5) Institutional child rearing**

Children who are brought up in institutions like the motherless babies home instead of the normal homes where they are taken care of by a limited number of people who are the same all the time, often become emotionally disturbed. This is because, they lack the conditions required to develop the necessary attachment for proper emotional development.

**b) School factors**

The school factors include unhealthy teacher's leadership style, relationship with peer, disjointed school curriculum, wrong teaching method and school environment.

**1) Unhealthy teacher's leadership style**

Like in the home, the leadership styles of a teacher matters a lot. The teacher's leadership style could be autocratic, permissive or democratic. Each of which has the same effect as in parenting style.

**2) Relationship with peer**

A child's relationship with his peers in school can greatly affect his emotions. A child could be rejected or isolated by others simply because of his race or other special factors. This will make such child to either withdraw from them to avoid conflicts, or fight to be accepted. Each of these is a show of ED.

**3) Disjoined school curriculum**

A disjointed school curriculum is that school curriculum which is not based on the interest, needs and ability of a child. Such will heighten the emotional tension of the child and make him show sign of ED. Related to this, is the use of wrong teaching method.

**4) School environment**

The school environment which comprises the site of the school, the plan of the building and the equipment for use by students and teachers can also be a source of emotional tension. An unhealthy school environment is deficient in space, light, ventilation and toilet facilities. Also, desks could be irritating, while chairs may either be too small or too large, resulting in poor postural habits and its concomitant physical and psychological/EDs.

**c) Societal factors**

In the society where the child is, there maybe negative modeling by adults which the child is supposed to learn from. For example, adults indulging in the act of stealing, lying, prostitution, bribery, addiction to drugs like cocaine, marijuana and other negative attitude which the children unfortunately emulates. These become the root causes of violent crimes, characteristic of ED in our society.

Furthermore, the problem of unemployment among youths even after training in various fields of human endeavor could be a source of ED.

**4. Counseling technique (Behavioral therapy)**

[1,5-6] stated that the counseling technique often adopted by guidance counselors and recommended to teachers in the identification and management of ED is the behavioral therapy. This technique is a non pharmacological treatment which looks more at specific, learned behaviors and how the environment has an impact on such behaviors. As its name suggests, behavioral therapy is focused on human behavior and aims to eradicate unwanted or maladaptive behavior. Behavioral therapy therefore, does not involve one specific method but has a wide range of techniques that can be used to handle a child's behavioral problems. Furthermore, regardless of the pupil's type of ED, the following strategies of behavioral counseling technique are useful.

**1) Model Calm Behavior**

No matter how angry the child may become, it is vital that teachers keep their cool, because when they respond to a child with anger or an order to calm down, it simply heightens the tension of the moment. Teachers should therefore react calmly to misbehavior as it places him in a better perspective to get at the root of the behavior. Similarly, too much time should not be spent on reprimand as it might reinforce the behavior by attracting the attention which the child may be seeking. By remaining calm, the child sees and learns to handle uncomfortable situations calmly.

**2) Teach the Child Calming techniques**

When the child is calm, help her remain so by teaching her techniques that will help her control her emotions. One example is the turtle technique. In this technique, the child thinks of a turtle when something happens to disturb her. She imagines pulling herself into her shell, taking several deep breaths and figuring out how to solve the problem. When she learns how to do this during calm times, the counselor can remind her of the technique during emotional outbursts by simply saying "turtle" to remind the child to stop, breathe and think.

**3) Rewards for Good Behavior**

Every time the child puts up a good behavior, it is important to give some sort of reward. This will reinforce the desired behavior positively

**4) Ignoring techniques**

Ignoring techniques should also be applied by teachers. Pretending not to have noticed a misbehavior may likely extinguish it as the attention sought was not received. This however, does not mean total neglect of misbehavior.

**5) Democratic leadership style**

Rules should be established in a democratic way in the classroom. This leads to a better appreciation of rules, why they were made and punishment for offenders. If punishments must be used, the user must not be partial and should properly inform a child on why he/she should be punished. It should however, be used as the last resort.

**6) Avoidance of threats**

Teachers should avoid threats as they may not fulfill them and where this is the case, ones authority is



eroded. Reporting a child to the higher authority should also be a last resort.

#### 7) Time out

Time out is a behavior modification approach where the child is removed from situations that are pleasant. This decreases the occurrence of the unwanted behavior.

#### 8) Use of teaching materials

An average emotionally disturbed child has problems with his memory and may not be able to think and learn in abstract forms. Therefore, for more permanency in learning, teaching materials that portray an ideal behavior should be used. Some of the instructional materials that can be used effectively for teaching the emotionally disturbed include non projected pictorial materials like real photographs, hand-made drawings, diagrams and projected pictorial materials like films, and slides of desirable behaviors.

### 5. Responsibilities of guidance counselors in the management of pupils with ED

[1,7-8] identified assessment, implementation, socialization training and referral as responsibilities of guidance counselors in the management of pupils with ED.

- 1) Assessment: It is the responsibility of guidance counselors to examine and assess the pupil's specific behavior problem using any or a combination of assessment techniques. The assessment techniques include observation, interview, questionnaire, rating scale and checklist. It is through assessment that the counselor will be able to identify antecedents that provoke and understand the effects of the ED on the child.
- 2) Implementation: Based on assessment, the counselor will outline and implement behavioral strategies that can help teachers, parents and guardians to reduce the inappropriate behavior and increase desirable behavior in the pupil.
- 3) Socialization training: Guidance counselors should carryout socialization training for the pupil, to enable the pupil learn, practice and adopt healthy self-assertion, confidence, approachable and communication behaviors.
- 4) Referral: It is also the responsibility of guidance counselors to refer any pupil with ED to a psychologist for more professional care when the need is evident.

### 6. Summary

ED is the consistent behavior which is considered unacceptable and capable of distorting not only the growth, development and education of a child but that of others. The two main classifications of ED are the aggressive and the withdrawn. The common characteristics include poor attention, withdrawal, hyperactivity, hypoactivity, very poor self concept, egocentricity, inability to maintain satisfactory relationship, to mention a few. The major causes of ED are biological and social factors. However, behavioral therapy is the counseling technique adopted in the management of pupils with ED.

### 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, ED is a problem among primary school pupils which requires the attention of teachers and the services of guidance counselors.

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