AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH FOR DISORDERED CHILDREN

The first step for dealing with disruptive behaviors is to realize that the child is distressed. Yes, they want a toy that isn’t available or don’t want to come to group, but understanding that their core feeling is distress, even fear, is helpful where naming the behavior in other ways is disrupting helpfulness. The core task of successful interventions is to calm the child away from anxiety to enable feelings that allow them to pay attention to the consequence of their learned behaviors.

There are three tasks that are basic to the successful development of children: attention, attunement, calming, and synchronicity. When they are performed well, there will be no children stressed enough to disrupt a classroom. Low levels of stress are fine, they facilitate learning. These tasks are easy to learn but are different from what caretakers may be used to doing and may take considerable practice.

ATTENTION

Paying attention to children is more than seeing what they are doing. It’s important to notice their level of tension. What may be causing them some stress is also of top importance. Behaviors are learned responses to what they feel about their environment. The child’s environment affecting them often can’t be named in advance. For example, a new child entering their play space may be an environment that could positively or negatively affect the behaviors of a child.

ATTUNEMENT

Paying attention is best when the observer understands the needs a child is expressing. Do they need to experience contact with your gentle eyes and voice? Are there toileting issues? Do they need to be in control of a toy, a group of toys, or of an area? Further, the strength of their needs will be greatly determined by their level of development regarding regulating their emotions. Emotions are the energy of positive and negative behaviors. Under the best of circumstances—prior attention, attunement, calming, and synchronicity—a child can regulate their emotions by the age of three. Only then are they ready to do any serious work regarding their social skills like sharing toys. Knowing if a child is ready to understand a request is crucial regarding refusals and acting-out behaviors. For example, a sophisticated understanding of sharing is rarely accomplished before the age of five.

CALMING

For the child to do less reacting and more thinking, it is crucial to calm them before dealing with the behavior that brought your response. Of course, if another child has been injured or frightened, they are to be cared for first. That will be some of the consequences of the behavior that will be discussed after the child who acted out is calmed. Calming a child who has just made a mistake with their behavior starts the trust of a caregiver that is needed. No positive development of the child will be accomplished without developing this trust that you are understanding, not angry or disappointed.

SYNCHRONICITY

Where attunement is noticing a child’s needs, synchronicity is an attitude about how we educate a child. Synchronicity trains a child’s attention with the reward of the caregiver being please, sometimes even excited. The caregiver may manipulate the environment with chosen things of interest, much like Montessori methods, but they do not push the attention, they wait to reinforce the child’s noticing. This education includes rewarding for paying attention to behaviors that haven’t worked well. Of course, their needs to be attention, not anxiety, if the child is to clearly think about the consequences of their behaviors.

I wrote this rather quickly and will welcome comments and corrections.

Jack Wright, Ph.D.

[alexjack@blackfoot.net](mailto:alexjack@blackfoot.net)