

Herding Cats and Working with Highly Intelligent Disturbed Children

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Working with highly intelligent, disturbed children has often been compared with trying to herd cats. Each one is unique with different personalities, strengths, and definitely their own way of viewing the world. They might be conforming, predictable, charming in the morning yet twitching their tail and prancing off in defiance after lunch. Innate in the cat personality is a will of its own and forcing a cat to conform only invites the inevitable scratching and often a crisis.

This paper will present a three part intervention to help educators and counselors work with highly intelligent, disturbed students in the development their potential and to focus on their strengths rather than their disturbance. This intervention combines counseling and educational theories with behavioral management practices, hand-on counseling tools, and gifted academic strategies.

Behavioral Interventions

Although children might be identified with a plethora of diagnoses as defined by the DSM IV, three main types of dysfunctional behavioral patterns emerge when working with gifted children. According to Richert (1990), dysfunctional children might exhibit conformist, withdrawn, or defiant behaviors.

Conformist children tend to cling to the expectations of others, are extrinsically motivated, and are insecure. They depend on others for leadership and avoid taking risks because they fear disapproval from others. Their insecurities often leave them “trapped” as they can not find their own solutions to problems and will rely on the demands of the group to which they are attempting to conform.

Withdrawn children refuse to take any action that might call attention to themselves. These children, often highly insecure, possess very low self-

esteem and judge themselves harshly. They usually avoid conflict or competition, and assume the role of follower.

Defiant children reject the expectations of others and feel rejected in return. Although they may join gangs, they are often loners, alienated from both themselves and their support groups. These children expect punishment, betrayal and, through their own actions, set themselves up for failure. Repeated failure serves to reinforce their feelings of rejection.

Lack of emotional intelligence, defined as an inability to function within societal expectations (Goleman, 1997), is exacerbated through the continuance of the three types of dysfunctional behaviors described above. Dysfunctional children often tend to get caught in behavioral circle that can quickly become a downward spiral. Decompensating behaviors must be halted, new behaviors introduced, and a safety net established. Obviously, the goal of educational system is for the child to exhibit only socially acceptable behaviors but immediate achievement of this goal is unrealistic. Halting unacceptable behaviors requires the establishment of a process that provides structure and documentation of success while allowing the child the freedom to experiment with both acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. This process takes time as well as patience, tolerance, and sustained effort on the part of both the child and the educator but can ultimately result in improved behaviors as well as increased self-esteem. The documentation provided by these sheets be used to promote building self control, demonstrate that the child can maintain better peer relationships, and helps the child to view challenges as opportunities rather and problems. The steps to this process include:

- Selection of realistic measurable goals for each day,

- Maintenance of a daily tally sheet which visually credits children for achieving objectives,

- External reinforcement using child-selected incentives,

- Documentation of daily achievement which can be used to chart progress.

Exhibit A, an elementary school documentation chart (Sawyer & Delgado, 2003), illustrates the three level daily documentation of student behaviors.

Exhibit A

Explorer _____ **Date of Voyage** _____

Reach for the Stars

My goal for today is: _____

Planet Points

You will get a point every _____ minutes if you demonstrate appropriate behavior.
Remember your daily goal!

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R

Sun Points

You will get points if you finish your work at the _____% mastery level.

Eng	Math	Read	History	Writing	Music	Sci	PE	Art
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Traveler Bonus Points

You will get points for special behaviors that you are working on in our community.

You can get Traveler points for

- a) Wearing appropriate clothing
- b) Bringing your materials to class
- c) Using Please and Thank you
- d) Volunteering to help another
- e) Ignoring inappropriate behaviors
- f) Saying Excuse Me
- g) Apologizing
- h) Positive participation
- i) Problem solving
- j) _____

I earned _____ points today. I choose selection ____ as my reward.

Teacher _____

Parent _____

Section 1 (Planet points) documents time on task using appropriate social behaviors. The child's workday is divided into equal intervals, usually from 10-30 minutes per interval, depending on the age and abilities of the child. Each interval is worth one point. If the child demonstrates appropriate behaviors within that interval, they are awarded the point. If the child demonstrates inappropriate behaviors during that interval, no point is awarded. Note that no points are deducted for inappropriate behaviors; the child simply cannot earn points during this time.

Section 2 (Sun points) documents successful completion of a task as defined by a percentage of mastery. Although Section 1 might document how well they stay on task, Section 2 documents the quality of their work during that time segment. For example, a student might work on a math assignment during a 30-minute time frame and thus earn a Section 1 point, but unless the quality of this work meets required academic standards, the student cannot earn a Section 2 point for that subject.

Section 3 (Traveler points) documents prosocial behaviors and the progression of the child's social/emotional development. Each time a child demonstrates an appropriate behavior as described on the documentation sheet, the child earns a point. This section should be tailored to meet the individual needs of the child. For example, a child who is easily distracted should have the opportunity to earn an "ignoring" point if they stay focused when there is a distraction within the classroom. A child who has difficulty expressing polite behaviors should have the opportunity to earn a point if they say, "excuse me" or "thank you" given an appropriate opportunity. Sometimes this is awkward in the beginning and the child only exhibits the appropriate behavior or expression in order to earn the point, but continued reward in the form of points and verbal acknowledgment from the support group will serve to help these to become second nature to the child.

Documentation sheets can be used as tool in communicating with the home, medical doctor, therapist/counselor, or even an ARD committee. For example a medical doctor can review the daily time document of Section 1 to determine the effectiveness of a particular drug (such as Adderal or Ritalin) throughout the school day. An educational specialist might consider the academic mastery level of particular subjects based on the daily performance of Section 2. For example if a child repeatedly does not

complete reading assignments at the 70% mastery level, the specialist might determine that the reading mastery levels be adjusted to a lower mastery level or the assignment content be lowered to reflect student ability. Parents can reinforce the school's efforts by rewarding the child at home based on the number of points earned at school each day. Parents will need to be counseled as to appropriate rewards. For example, if a child earn a certain number of points for the day, they might be awarded the opportunity to chose the television show that their family would watch that night. Other rewards might include staying up 15 minutes later at night, selecting their favorite choices for dinner or getting first chance at the hot water for a shower.

Many students believe their behaviors are beyond their control and they are "hopeless" situations. Documentation can provide the student with concrete data regarding their ability to be successful. They can work toward increasing their final score for each day and thus challenge themselves to become more productive and self-reliant. They can confirm that they do have the capacity for appropriate behavior and self-control with the evidence provided by these documentation sheets.

Counseling Intervention

Many children are bright enough to perceive the difference between their demonstrated behaviors and those expected by standard societal norms. In order to maintain control in their lives, they creatively manipulate their environment, thus creating chaos. Although unsettling for those who attempt to support the child, chaos becomes the standard and the child maintains control. This does not mean the child is happy. They usually cannot tolerate themselves as they are but they cannot find the "correct path" and they cannot fathom there is a feasible solution to this situation. The disturbed gifted child often believes that no one can understand them and that no one can help them.

This child must learn about their disturbance, uncover and confront blocks, and place their issues in proper perspective. This requires the assistance of a skilled counselor who understands the unique needs and perspectives to the gifted child and is strong enough to lead the child through the gray areas without yielding to the child's manipulative behaviors. This counselor must:

Define expectations as well as the role of confrontation, trust, and progress with the child,

- Teach the child about their disturbance and help them to recognize the impact of both positive and negative thought and behavioral patterns,
- Periodically review progress with a support team in order to reduce psychoknowledgeable clients from sabotaging or distorting their progress,
- Document decompensation patterns and create strategy plans to help the client intervene prior to decompensation,
- Use counseling modalities that accentuate the child's strengths.

The Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983), suggests that children can demonstrate intellectual abilities in seven different categories. This theory strongly implies that those working with a gifted child should encourage the child to learn using those areas of strength. This implication can be extended to counseling practices with the child. Although some children are linguistically intelligent and possess advanced the ability to verbalize their feelings, many children are gifted in other areas and do not possess the advanced skill necessary to linguistically describe their emotions. If the therapist acknowledges that the gifted child is stronger in other intellectual arenas and uses alternate methods of approaching the child, the therapist will probably be more successful in getting the child to open up and explore hidden feeling.

The following counseling activities might be incorporated into the child's counseling sessions in order to facilitate the release of emotion:

Intelligence	Activities
Linguistic	Journalizing, group discussion, bibliotherapy, multi-media, sentence completion, re-writing story endings
Logical-mathematical	Timelines, developmental, sequential organization of precipitating factors, examination of behavioral cause/effect , technical details of disorders
Spatial intelligence	Collage, clay/sculpture, body image tracing
Musical intelligence	Writing songs & music, rhythmic patterning, drumming,
Bodily-kinesthetic	Dance, "Ropes" programs, 1:1 activity such as

	running, basketball
Interpersonal	Family “Ropes” participation, socio-drama, role-playing, sand tray
Intrapersonal	Biofeedback, breathing exercises, visual imaging

Once the child has the needed tools for communication combined with the necessary trusting relationship with the counselor, the child should be able to uncover and confront blocks, develop the ability to deal with their disturbance and place issues in the proper perspective. Hopefully, this will assist the child in replacing their negative self-image with an increased focus on their strengths.

Academic Intervention

At the core of every gifted program lie those strategies conducive to developing the child’s academic potential. Basic school curriculum should be expanded, accelerated, or differentiated in order to provide more than the minimal skills. Failure to do so can result in acute boredom for the gifted child. When bored, the “average” gifted child can present behavioral challenges; when bored, the “disturbed” gifted child can create utter chaos. Therefore, the utilization of core gifted strategies such as the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli and Reis, 1985) and curriculum compacting (Renzulli, Smith, and Reis, 1982) is imperative for the success of the gifted disturbed child. These strategies allow the child to progress at their own pace while providing structure and support.

Other strategies should be used to supplement these core strategies. Learning how to solve problems using a structured methodology (Ruggiero, 1988; Frederiksen, 1984) can help the child solve both academic and personal problems. Experiential approaches to tactile learning (Rhonke, 1989) can assist in helping the child in real-life situations and, with the support of both peers and mentors, explore options for situational dilemmas.

Educators involved in developing appropriate curricular lesson plans for the gifted disturbed student are encouraged to follow this sequence:

- Introduce basic programmatic concepts to the child and family
- Introduce the lesson objectives to the child and family

Assist the child in selecting activities conducive to their strengths and abilities (the “buy in”)

Have the child present their proposed activities to a selected committee in order to gain external support

Support the child while they are completing activities and projects

Assist the child in analyzing data resulting from their projects

Help the child create a presentation resulting from their findings

Provide the child with an appropriate audience and feedback for their presentation

Assist the child in self-evaluating their efforts using the objectives, scope and sequence, and motivational survey as the evaluative rubric.

Conclusion

This three-part intervention was piloted on patients in a residential-type hospital setting and later extended to students in grades two through five in a public school setting. Although concrete documentation on the success of this project is unavailable due to confidentiality issues, it should be noted that none of the patients who participated in the pilot were re-admitted to the hospital for at least one year post-project. Problems did, however, resurface when the pilot patients moved into school settings that did not use the intervention model.

Attempts to use this program within the public school setting met with mixed results. Some teachers used this program within the regular or special education setting with favorable results as measured by student behaviors, attendance, and grades. Other teachers dismissed both the behavioral and academic components as “too much work for the teacher” and returned to traditional methods of working with their students. Their students continued to exhibit traditional problematic behaviors.

Participating counselors agreed that multi-modality counseling approaches seemed to be far more effective in working with disturbed gifted students than the traditional “talking” approaches. Several psychiatrists working with this model supported this concept toward counseling and frequently referred particularly perplexing cases to the program counselors in order to facilitate progress. Counselors involved in this program indicated they strongly believed all counselors should receive training on addressing the needs of disturbed gifted children, modifying traditional counseling techniques, and

finding ways to create a supportive environment prior to working with gifted disturbed children.

The combination of behavioral, counseling, and academic support builds an intervention triad that shows gifted disturbed children that their strengths are more vital to society than their disruptions. The collaborative efforts of the child, family, counselor, medical doctors, and educator can help reach these children. With supportive direction and intervention, these children can maximize their abilities and develop their potential to the fullest extent possible.

Now...if someone could just develop a safe and effective plan to herd cats....

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