



Psyched Express

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I never worry about action, only inaction. Winston Churchill

Learning Problems vs Behavior Problems- How Can You Tell the Difference?

Every night on the news, some violent event occurs somewhere in our country, let alone the terrible things that have happened around here. We all know what they are. But these awful incidences beg the observation that maybe some dreadful and tragic events might be the result of not catching a problem early enough, not paying attention to the symptoms, or worse, simply thinking, "Oh, he'll grow out of it," or "He's just frustrated". But there have been too many episodes to conclude that *growing out of it* may turn into *it* getting worse.

Studies are now underway to try to find out more about why and when negative behaviors escalate, what may be the warning signs and what can teachers, parents and caregivers do to understand the red flags to help them step in to help sooner. Promoting children's healthy social and emotional development is at the heart of the concern, so what do we know already that might make a difference?

What are some facts already known about childhood behavior issues?

1. 20% of children have anxiety/depression issues
2. 15% have disruptive problems
3. 2% may be on the autism spectrum
4. Externalizing problems include ADHD and Oppositional Defiant Disorder
5. Internalizing Problems include Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Depression, and Bipolar Disorder

However, it must be kept in mind that emotional issues can run hand in hand with learning problems AND that early intervention works better for both. Lets look at those facts.

1. Treatments are more effective when the problems are caught early.
2. Parents and teachers can be successful and used as allies in treatment.

So the earlier, the better. The question still remains, what do we look for?



I can remember the frustration of not being able to talk. I knew what I wanted to say but I could not get the words out, so I would just scream.

Temple Grandin

Preschool/Elementary school years:

- Behavior problems in preschool or daycare
- Hyperactivity way beyond what the other kids are doing
- Trouble sleeping
- Persistent nightmares
- Excessive fear, worrying, or crying
- Extreme disobedience or aggression. Because it's often within a child's nature to disobey or intrude on a playmate's space, an excessive degree of this behavior is what should concern you, such as deliberate destructiveness or hurting peers or animals.
- Lots of temper tantrums all the time
- Persistent difficulty separating from a parent. Many children experience separation anxiety at first; there could be a problem if this goes on for months.
- Excessive fears and worries
- Extreme hyperactivity
- Sudden decrease in school performance
- Loss of interest in friends or favorite activities
- Loss of appetite
- Sudden changes in weight
- Excessive worry about weight gain
- Sudden changes in sleep habits
- Visible prolonged sadness

However, as was already stated, the above problems may co-occur with learning problems. The symptoms of learning problems are below.

Preschool signs and symptoms of learning disabilities

- Problems pronouncing words
- Trouble finding the right word
- Difficulty rhyming
- Trouble learning the alphabet, numbers, colors, shapes, days of the week
- Difficulty following directions or learning routines
- Difficulty controlling crayons, pencils, and scissors, or coloring within the lines
- Trouble with buttons, zippers, snaps, learning to tie shoes

Ages 5-9 signs and symptoms of learning disabilities

- Trouble learning the connection between letters and sounds
- Unable to blend sounds to make words
- Confuses basic words when reading
- Consistently misspells words and makes frequent reading errors
- Trouble learning basic math concepts
- Difficulty telling time and remembering sequences
- Slow to learn new skills

Ages 10-13 signs and symptoms of learning disabilities

- Difficulty with reading comprehension or math skills
- Trouble with open-ended test questions and word problems
- Dislikes reading and writing; avoids reading aloud
- Spells the same word differently in a single document
- Poor organizational skills (bedroom, homework, desk is messy and disorganized)
- Trouble following classroom discussions and expressing thoughts aloud
- Poor handwriting

The Value of Professional Screening

So when a child arrives in a classroom and over a few weeks time challenges appear, what can a teacher do to obtain more information? Screening by a professional, a person trained, certified and licensed to observe a child and to help make educated observations.

What does screening encompass?

A screening involves obtaining information from the teacher or parent and even the student. A screening will document past interventions, assessments and hearing and vision testing. A one-on-one meeting with the student will then look at memory, speech-language ability, behavior, attention, processing and visual-motor skills. A classroom observation will help expand on these within a classroom learning context.

What happens next?

Parents are counseled about the screening results along with what has been noted about the student's classroom performance or behavior. If a student has not had a vision or hearing test, this is usually recommended first. After that, if it is recommended that the student receive a complete evaluation, choices as to public school or private assessment directions can be explained. Whatever the parent decides, a screening can help them move forward.

Except in some instances, a screening **usually does not** provide standardized test results, but it can help in the overall documentation of what is happening with that student. Further testing and observations along with parent and teacher input can provide a clear picture.

But, a screening can be a step in the right direction – HELP for that child.

There have been questions about the screening Katy and I do, what she as a licensed Educational Psychologist screens, and what I, a licensed Speech-Language Pathologist screens because ***we both use the same screening protocol.*** I would say it is a matter of what kind of issue warrants the screening. Katy is more adept at behavior issues even though I can certainly comment on these. I am more adept at language issues which influence learning. However since we use the same protocol, either of us can screen the basic developmental areas that can be learning/emotional red flags. Either of us can make recommendations as to the next steps. In some instances, both of us screen. The important thing is to have the student screened. Too many children slip through the cracks. Without documentation, it is more difficult for the public school to do an assessment, more difficult for parents to understand what steps to take next, AND more difficult for the school to document difficulties over time if parents decide to wait on further steps.

