

Austin Attachment and Counseling Center

Teaching Children with Early Developmental Trauma

Almost every characteristic of learning can be problematic for the traumatized child. They fear anything novel and unknown. Below is a list of characteristics of early trauma and attachment. From the moment they enter the classroom, they can be challenging to teachers with their endless number of questions and requests. American schools are designed for Left Brain learning techniques and because of their early trauma, many of these children are considered Right Brain Learners.

1. Early Developmental Trauma interferes with the child's ability to learn new information unless the information is relevant to his immediate desires or his long-term survival plans. The primary goal of Attachment Resistant children is to separate themselves from intimate relationships such as parents and teachers. Often times, the child sees the parents and teacher as perpetrators.
2. Schedules and Curriculum seem less important to Attachment Resistant Children because of their need to remain safe. These children focus on their internal needs and have little energy to devote to external matters.
3. Much of the motivation for participation in school rests on assumed desires to interact collaborative with others and to foster one's own individual growth and learning. These factors carry little weight with an Attachment Resistant child's thinking.
4. Many of the activities in a school setting are group-based. Having to deal with multiple people simultaneously increases the chances of stimulating the Attachment Resistant child's anxiety, which will lead to negative behavioral attempts to re-establish a sense of control. Being in control is one way of feeling safe.
5. One of the primary defensive maneuvers that Attachment Resistant children rely on to maintain their psychological safety is that of projection. They have a keen sense of where a parent or teacher's buttons are located and the ability to push them to gain separation. The many people present in the school context offers the Attachment Resistant child an abundance of targets for their projections. Because they're hyper vigilant, Attachment Resistant children are generally quite perceptive of others' vulnerability and skillful at striking at those vulnerability with their projections. This can make the projections seem very believable to the receiver which can put that person on the defensive.
6. Most of the sources of gratification offered by school {parent and teacher approval, public recognition of achievement, grades on tests / report cards} are delayed gratifications. Attachment Resistant children's relentless focus on

gratification in the moment, and distrust of the future, leaves these gratifications stripped of most of their appeal; and hence, not motivating in the end.

7. School demands performance, and Attachment Resistant children usually don't perform on others' terms. Refusal to perform is one method Attachment Resistant children will use to demonstrate to the teacher that they are not under the teacher's control. This parallels the Attachment Resistant child's refusal to show affection at home on the parents' terms.
8. Teachers have a dual role: that of the dispenser of "educational goodies" {instruction / information, attention, recognition for effort / achievement, granting requests, etc.} and that of limit-setter. This dual role will inevitably conflict with the Attachment Resistant child's personal priorities sooner or later. As occurs at home with parents, no matter how many times a teacher has been an ally/supporter to an Attachment Resistant child in the past, the first time that teacher blocks the student's desires, all those past occasions will be forgotten and the teacher will be instantaneously transformed from an ally to a perpetrator in the child's eyes. Authority which the student sees as unfair and deserves no respect, the Attachment Resistant child will feel entitled to be disrespectful to such a "morally bankrupt" authority figure.

Because teachers must deal with the numbers presented by a classroom, as opposed to a family, the authority of teachers can appear even more arbitrary and persecutory than parental authority. When teachers set limits for the greater good of the whole class, this will seem more arbitrary still, as Attachment Resistant children have no conception of "the common good". Understandably, teachers may feel attacked and unappreciated themselves at these moments, and because these feelings can run very strong, it is tempting to react. Reacting, however, will only worsen the situation, for the child will see the reaction as "evidence" that the teacher is, in fact, a punitive authority figure out to get the child.

Behaviors Commonly Displayed by Attachment Resistant Children in School

1. The onset of behavioral difficulties with an Attachment Resistant child in the school setting can be very rapid and often without any "seeming apparent trigger". However, there is ALWAYS a trigger- it just may not be very apparent. It often takes both close observation and "thinking on one's feet" to figure out some of these triggers. The more a teacher figures out about an Attachment Resistant student's triggers the more effectively that teacher will be able to work with that student.
2. Regressive behaviors: Attachment Resistant children can exhibit a wide range of immature behaviors in the classroom, including: use of a babyish voice, crawling around on the floor, curling up under furniture, pretending to be an animal, noise making, negative verbalization, speaking nonsensical language, making graphic sexual and / or excretory remarks, giddyish forced laughter, and others. These regressive behaviors usually signal an upsurge of anxiety in the child, and they function both as a way to get away from the anxiety as well as to remove the

child from the teacher's immediate control, which serves to further lessen the child's anxiety). Though these behaviors can appear bizarre, they usually do not mean that the child is psychotic at that moment.

3. Nuisance behaviors: These are frequently occurring minor infractions {such as interrupting or asking excessive questions} that disrupt the simplest of everyday interactions. These nuisance kinds of behaviors serve a dual purpose. First, they serve as ongoing reminders that the Attachment Resistant student is not under the teacher's domain. Secondly, they are "probes" that the Attachment Resistant child sends out into the environment to acquire information about the situation. From others' reactions to these "behavioral probes", Attachment Resistant children begin to piece together who is punitive and who is supportive; who will respond and who will ignore; who has a short fuse and who has a longer fuse, etc. The Attachment Resistant child uses the responses to his probes to figure out how to "work" the adults. When the Attachment Resistant child feels confident that he knows how to maneuver the teacher, the "honeymoon" will be over.
4. Temper tantrums: Attachment Resistant children are quite capable of full-blown temper outbursts at school. Such outbursts can consist of any or all of the following: screaming, shouting, throwing objects, use of obscene language, verbal threats, physical threats, physical aggression, and running out of the classroom and sometimes all the way out of the building. Such extreme outbursts usually indicate that the child's anxiety has escalated to near-panic levels, and the outburst is a desperate attempt to ward off the perceived threat. Attachment Resistant children can get to this level of near-panic in as little 1-2 minutes if they perceive a danger of sufficient magnitude.
5. Provocative behaviors towards peers: Attachment Resistant children are deliberately provocative towards peers for a variety of reasons {emotional hot potato}. Peers are vulnerable to react, and Attachment Resistant children will see the reaction as proof of their power to control others. Peers will need support and suggestions from adults to learn to minimize their response to the provocations. Provocative behavior, from an Attachment Resistant child towards peers, is almost impossible to eliminate solely by working with the Attachment Resistant child.
6. Teacher instruction: Attachment Resistant children often accept curriculum instruction from the teacher on an erratic basis. One day, the Attachment Resistant student can be focused, taking in information, and on-task. The next day, he may seem completely unworkable, which can appear as "spaciness", "forgetfulness", "distractibility", calling out, outright defiance, or complaints of boredom and disinterest. Usually this fluctuating pattern of receptiveness to instruction is one more way the Attachment Resistant student seeks to remind the teacher that he doesn't readily submit to outside authority.
7. Attachment Resistant children presume to know the teacher's intention in assigning work: it has nothing to do with learning. To the Attachment Resistant child, academic tasks are given out simply as a way to control the child, keep

them quiet, and prove to them that the teacher is in charge. Task completion is usually a reflection of how secure or insecure the Attachment Resistant child feels at a given moment. If the child feels confident about their control, then "yielding to the teacher" by doing the task won't be a problem. However, if the Attachment Resistant child isn't feeling so in control, then she is apt to choose to resist the task in order to "defeat the teacher".

8. Work production: The Attachment Resistant child most often either refuses to do assignments outright or does them in a haphazard, perfunctory manner. Occasionally, these children will apply themselves and often turn in a credible product when they do so. These seeming "lightning bolts" of intelligence, motivation, and effort are generally all too appealing to the adult world of teachers and parents- AND THAT IS PRECISELY THEIR PURPOSE. The Attachment Resistant child dangles these moments of production in front of the adults to tantalize them into a game of trying to figure out what to do to get the Attachment Resistant student to perform like this more often. Taking this bait and entering this game is exactly like stepping in quicksand. The more the adults struggle to get the child to perform, the deeper the adults sink into the muck. Meanwhile, the Attachment Resistant child is "laughing all the way to the bank".

Understandably, teachers and parents often view the Attachment Resistant child's unpredictable work production, despite having the ability, as pure stubbornness. This is partially correct, but because there is more going on than just stubbornness. This is just one more part of the Attachment Resistant child's 24/7 need to maintain control to feel safe.

The Attachment Resistant child's never completing work on a consistent, longer-term basis serves a self-protective function for the child in addition to its maddening impact on the adults. By not turning out enough work so that it can be measured reliably, the Attachment Resistant child cleverly avoids having to confront the disturbing reality that there is ability, knowledge, and power greater than his. In keeping his true ability elusively immeasurable, the Attachment Resistant child can keep his personal illusion intact that he is the smartest, most knowledgeable in the room. Protecting this belief in school is critical for the Attachment Resistant child to maintain his cornerstone belief that he has the ability to be in control of all people in all situations in all places.

9. Support / Praise: Attachment Resistant children commonly have one of three responses to receiving support and / or praise in the school setting: 1} accept the support without any clear overt reaction; 2} reject the support outright; and 3} accept and then denigrate the support. The Attachment Resistant student will recycle these three responses in an unpredictable sequence that defies any pattern. The teacher is left in the uncomfortable position of never knowing what will come back should support / praise be offered. Meanwhile, the child strategically creates the appearance of being immune to praise and support which is yet one more aspect of retaining control.

Attachment Resistant children rarely, if ever, express any gratitude for offers of support, as gratitude implies dependence and dependence is seen as dangerous by the Attachment Resistant child. Knowing this up front can be a buffer for teachers against feeling unappreciated and resentful when their extra efforts go unrecognized by the child.

What Doesn't Work - Interventions

1. Conventional behavior management plans / level systems. Such plans are based on consistency, and this consistency makes these plans easy targets for the strategic thinking of an Attachment Resistant child. Attachment Resistant children will see a behavior management plan, not as a way to change behavior, but as simply one more thing to learn "how to work" for their own purposes. Their movements up and down the levels has to do with their own purpose at any given moment, and little or nothing to do with success / failure or earning adult approval. Attachment Resistant children may even use behavior management systems as bait to draw the adults into useless discussions about how to sustain progress. The end result can be that it is the teacher's behavior, rather than the child's, that ends up getting "managed".
2. Challenging the Attachment Resistant child's perspective with "objective evidence" in order to persuade them that their thinking is somehow incorrect. This approach assumes that the teacher and child share a common view of "reality"- not true {remember that Attachment Resistant children live in a parallel universe}. The teacher's view will make little or no sense to the Attachment Resistant child. In fact, the Attachment Resistant child is apt to see this approach as a manipulative attempt on the teacher's part to set the child up in some way.
3. Traditional problem solving questions such as:

What happened?
What was your part in it?
What could you have done differently?

Attachment Resistant children will learn to spin off the "desired answers", but they will be meaningless answers. The time spent on this exercise will be wasted time.

4. Teachers taking Attachment Resistant children's behavior or statements personally. This usually takes some practice as Attachment Resistant children are skilled at discovering adults' tender spots and going after them.
5. Reacting emotionally to Attachment Resistant children's behavior. This only reinforces the Attachment Resistant child's sense of being in control of the adult's emotions { a goal they generally pursue}. Judging or criticizing the behavior and reactive consequences all fall into this category. This really takes some practice as Attachment Resistant children's behavior can be relentless, day in-day out, as any parent can testify.

6. Doing just about anything the same way every time.

What Does Work

1. Being somewhat unpredictable on purpose. Such unpredictability is necessary to get past the Attachment Resistant child's vast array of avoidance maneuvers. An adult an Attachment Resistant child can predict is an adult an Attachment Resistant child can "work".
2. Drilling in the concept of "choice". Choice is an idea that is often absent in Attachment Resistant children's thinking. It is not simply that they refuse to accept responsibility- the ideas of people making choices and having responsibility makes no sense to Attachment Resistant children. They need to have it pointed out, matter-of-factly, over and over, that they are making choices all the time. Then discussion can begin to move towards making better vs. worse choices.
3. Four questions never to ask Attachment Resistant children:
 - Did you...?
 - Why did you...?
 - Do you remember...?
 - What did you say?

Attachment Resistant children can compose eloquent answers to adult questions that mean absolutely nothing. A question to an Attachment Resistant child is simply an invitation to trick an adult. It works much better to phrase statements as guesses and let them react to the guess. Their reaction to guesses will tell you much more than their answers to questions.

4. Take guesses in order to unmask the Attachment Resistant child's hidden agenda {example: "It looks like your feeling more worried today so you're choosing to not do your work to try to show me that you're in control}.
5. Use of the word "trick" to describe Attachment Resistant children's strategic behavior works better than the more loaded words like "manipulative", "lying", etc.
6. Become a good observer of Attachment Resistant children's nonverbal responses {facial expressions, body position and movements, eyes, voice tone, etc}. These are the most accurate signs of what is going on inside the child. If you listen only to what they say, you will go in circles repeatedly, getting nowhere.
7. Act as historian for the Attachment Resistant child. As Attachment Resistant children live in the moment, they need adults to remind them of past events that can help maintain more perspective on the present.

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