

“When It Starts to Feel Personal”

SUMMARY: This article first briefly explores four self-defeating dynamics common among troubled children and youth.

It then delves into specific personal reasons why each of these dynamics may be particularly challenging for helping adults to handle professionally.

For more detailed information about staff training in this or related topics, visit www.TACT2.com, or contact Dr. Steve Parese at SBParese@aol.com.



Understanding Adult Issues with Troubled Youth

By Steve Parese, Ed.D.

Four Self Defeating Dynamics

Troubled children and youth have often experienced a great deal of hardship and disappointment in their lives. As a result, they sometimes react to challenging situations in self-defeating ways, escalating problems rather than solving them. While every child is unique, four behavior patterns are among the most common:

a. When triggered, Aggressive youth often express angry feelings very directly with loud, intimidating, challenging, even destructive behaviors. Their actions are often motivated by a desire for power and control over others.

b. Under stressful conditions, Passive Aggressive youth generally hide so-called “negative” feelings behind fake smiles, expressing resentment indirectly through sarcasm, manipulation, and sneakiness. Their actions are often motivated by the pleasure of subtly controlling others.

c. Avoidant youth are frequently depressed, easily overwhelmed by challenging situations. They act out their emotions by withdrawing, shutting down, putting in minimal effort, sometimes even harming themselves. Their actions are often motivated by helplessness and low self-esteem.

d. When uncertain, Dependent youth become quite needy. They often become needy, clingy, and whiny, even demanding when their needs are not immediately met. Their immature behavior is generally driven by a desire for acceptance and safety.

Each of these patterns allows troubled students to directly or indirectly control their lives. Aggressive and passive aggressive students influence others through intimidation and manipulation; avoidant and dependent youngsters undermine relationships by withdrawing or whining. In each case, the child sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy of rejection and

failure. In each case, they get to feel in charge of a difficult situation, though the eventual outcome may be negative. Yet for some, predictable failure seems better than the uncertainty of acceptance and success.

Tapping into Adult Issues

One of these predictably negative outcomes is adult rejection. Unless we are very well trained, even caring adults can become frustrated and overwhelmed by these “inappropriate” behaviors. We may find ourselves rejecting the child, rather than correcting the behavior. This is even more likely when a youth’s behavior taps into our own emotional issues.

We all bring our personal histories to our professional work with troubled children and youth. In some cases, our childhood may include traumas as challenging as those our students have experienced, leading to



painfully deep feelings. In other cases, our upbringing may have given us a perspective so different from our students’ that we have difficulty empathizing at all. When we have a deeper understanding of our own issues and the four self-defeating dynamics discussed earlier, we are more likely to respond professionally rather than react personally.

Consider the four dynamics: Aggressive (loud, threatening, rebellious); Passive Aggressive (sneaky, manipulative, deceptive); Avoidant (withdrawn, depressed, unmotivated); and Dependent (whiny, needy, demanding).

Which of these is most difficult for you to work with? With which do you have the hardest time remaining focused and professional? Here are

some generic explanations why these dynamics may challenge you so thoroughly.

Why Aggressive Youth May Be Challenging

If Aggressive youth are our least favorite/most difficult, it **could** be because:

1. Perhaps we grew up with loud, angry, aggressive people in our lives. Living with anger and fear, we decided that we would never be like that. We avoided, placated, withdrew -- anything to create an emotional distance from them and protect ourselves from the scary feelings they created in us. When angry, aggressive youth bring up some of the same scary feelings, our solution may be to distance ourselves from them too -- by disliking them, avoiding them, etc.

2. A second possibility: Under the same conditions of growing up with loud, angry, aggressive people, we may have learned to become loud, angry, and aggressive as well, just to get by. Since then, we’ve gotten most of this “dark side” under control, but we’re afraid of what we’re capable of when angered. Rather than let angry, aggressive youth spark our fuses, we tell ourselves that we dislike them. We react to their behavior with rigid rule enforcement. We’re not completely sure we can control our own anger, so we seek to control them instead.

3. Finally, it may simply be that loud, angry, aggressive youth provoke a normal, natural, self-protective fear in us. Very little in an otherwise normal life has prepared us for their sometimes dangerous, often scary behavior, so we avoid them to avoid getting hurt.

Why Passive Aggressive Youth May Be Challenging

If Passive-Aggressive youth are our least favorite/most difficult, it **could** be because:

1. Perhaps we grew up in homes that taught us to take pride in being direct and straightforward. We believe strongly that ‘If you have something to say, say it straight to my face. Bring it out in the open, not behind my back.’ Sneaky, manipulative, deceptive

youth violate our core beliefs about openness and honesty. We dislike them because they anger or irritate us with their unwillingness to act as we would, and think they should.

2. A second possibility: Perhaps we grew up in overprotective or controlling homes, and learned to hide “negative” feelings like anger. Perhaps, to get by, we developed some passive aggressive tendencies ourselves, but now intensely dislike this sneaky, manipulative, or deceptive part in us. So when we have to deal with passive aggressive youth -- youth who remind us of these undesirable traits in ourselves -- we try to push them away. It’s too painful to dislike or demean ourselves, so we dislike (and perhaps demean) them instead.

Why Avoidant Youth May Be Challenging

If Avoidant/Depressed youth are our least favorite/most difficult, it **could** be because:

1. Perhaps we grew up in homes that taught us to take a positive upbeat outlook on life. We take pride in being self-directed, and making things happen for ourselves. We believe strongly that life is a matter of perception, of seeing challenges instead of obstacles. Why can’t these depressed (and depressing) kids learn to do the same thing? Why cry? Why withdraw? Why refuse to even try?? Depressed youth violate our core belief that “life is good,” and we find it hard to connect with or like them at all.

2. A second possibility: It is possible that we ourselves struggle with depression at some level. Or perhaps we have experienced some of the same traumas, the same abandonments that these depressed children have. Regardless, their depression may tap into our own depressive issues, issues we are trying to conceal from ourselves. It is too painful to hear their stories, see their behaviors, feel their feelings -- so we distance ourselves from them instead.

Why Dependent Youth May Be Challenging

If Dependent youth are our least favorite/most difficult, it **could** be because:

1. Perhaps we grew up in homes where things weren’t ideal, but we learned to make the best of tough situations instead of complaining about them. We never had things handed to us on silver platters growing up -- and perhaps still don’t! We’ve been knocked down, rejected, and depreciated at times, but we’ve picked ourselves back up. Why can’t these whiny, clingy, needy kids do the same? Because dependent youth violate our “do it for yourself” beliefs, we find it hard to like them at all.

2. A second possibility: Something about our own upbringing or life experiences causes us to empathize so thoroughly with the pain of needy, dependent children that we actually intensely FEEL their wounds. We become overwhelmed with helplessness and grief. The solution to this overwhelming emotion is distance ourselves from it... and from the kids whose life stories bring up such pain in us.

Closing

Adults who work with troubled children and youth face many challenges, not the least of which is the tendency of these youth to push away the very people who are there to help them. When we understand these self-defeating dynamics and the way they may interact with our own beliefs and issues, we gain the insight needed to remain more professional in moments of crisis.

For more information about this topic:

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