

BEHAVIOUR DISORDERS

CAUSES, DEVELOPMENT AND TREATMENT IN CHILDREN

A clear summary of the causes of behaviour disorders for classroom teachers, complete with strategies for parental and school intervention.

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INTRODUCTION

This book has been written in response to the concern among teachers about the growing number of young children entering school with serious behaviour problems. It is intended to give teachers an understanding into the nature, causes, development, outcomes and treatment of behaviour disorders. It also provides the rationale and background information for an intervention programme targeting five - nine year old children with significant behaviour problems.

The behaviour of these children not only interferes with their own learning and social development but also the learning, well-being and happiness of their classmates. Their behaviour often prevents the smooth operation of learning programmes and the development of a positive, harmonious class tone.

Furthermore, research shows that many teenagers with serious social/emotional/behavioural problems had significant behavioural problems in their first few years at school and often at the preschool level. Research is clearly showing that the majority of these difficult young children are not just slow developing appropriate social behaviour, nor will they just “grow out of it” but are in fact at serious risk of developing into socially maladjusted young adults who cause themselves and those around them a great deal of suffering and misery. They have begun on a self destructive path likely to be characterised by increasing rejection from adults and peers, increasing criticism and punishment, loss of friends, academic failure, low self esteem, unhappy relationships, and increasing delinquent behaviour in their teenage years.

Early intervention with these children and their families offers the best possible chance of preventing the development of major behavioural and adjustment problems in later life. There is a substantial body of research on the effectiveness of early intervention programmes.

While intervention programmes with identified “at risk” families of preschool aged children should be the first priority, it is a fact that this is often not happening for a variety of reasons, and many children with behaviour problems are not really identified as having serious behaviour problems (or they are not acknowledged as significant problems) until after children have started school. The detrimental effects of these behaviour problems for the child’s academic and social development will be minimised by teaching the child to engage in positive social behaviour as early as possible in his/her school life. Hence the need for a “Behaviour Recovery Programme” for young children.

There are no simple answers or easy ways to change serious problem behaviour in children. What is required is the home and school working together and consistent teaching, management and perseverance over a number of months or even years in order to try and overcome the effects of past inappropriate learning and deficient home backgrounds.

UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF BEHAVIOUR DISORDERS

Behaviour disordered children and youth are a major concern in today's society. There are almost daily reports in the papers and on the T.V. news of antisocial and criminal acts committed by young people. Teachers regularly express concern about having to deal with children as young as five who are already displaying serious antisocial behaviours such as defiance, abuse and aggression. Many people wonder why there seems to be an increasing number of children with serious behaviour problems and what we should be doing to prevent or rectify these problems. (Appendix 1 presents some of the commonly suggested causes for the increase in the number of behaviour disordered children and youth).

Fortunately, as well as a lot of talk, opinion and emotion on the topic of children with behaviour problems, there is also a great deal of research and accumulated knowledge.

Before considering the specific causal factors in the development of children's behaviour disorders a sociological model will be looked at to provide a broader social context in which to consider the development of children's behaviour disorders and interventions to address these problems.

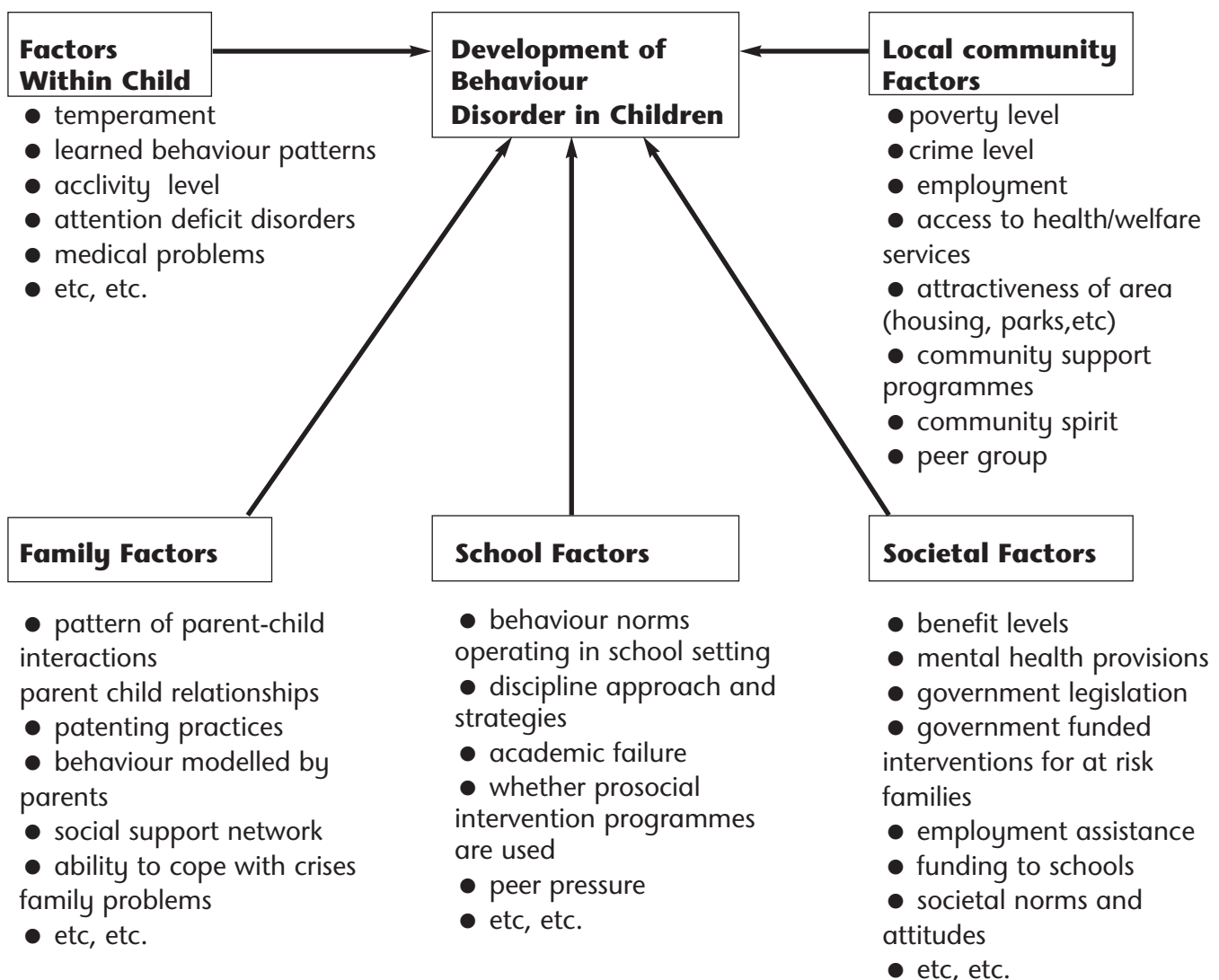


Figure 1:2 A Sociological Perspective. Categories of Factors Contributing to the Development of Behaviour Disorders.

Figure 1:2 shows that there are many pieces to the puzzle when considering the problem of behaviour disordered children including the presence of adverse factors and the lack of positive factors. It can be simplified to some extent by understanding that societal and community factors operate primarily through their impact on the family, child and school.

To significantly reduce the number of behaviour disordered young people in society one needs to address some of the societal and community factors (eg. unemployment, slum like communities) that are strongly associated with behaviour disorders rather than just relying on intensive individual intervention programmes at school to change these children's unacceptable patterns of behaviour after they have developed.

It is also a major concern that at the present time some communities/families are producing behaviour disordered children at a greater rate and of a more serious nature than can be changed with the current resources available for school based interventions.

TARGETED INTERVENTIONS

1 Family Support interventions

- From birth, parent education and support
- Family workers, home visits - linking to health welfare services. eg Healthy Start, Plunket

2 Preschool Interventions

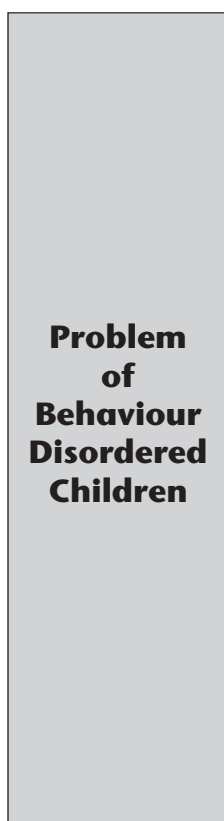
- Link home and preschool
- Parent training especially in managing behaviour

3 Primary School Intervention

- Comprehensive intervention involving home and school for identified children

4 Secondary School Intervention

- As above
- Support teacher and child, involve peers and persevere



GENERAL INTERVENTIONS

1 National/Government Level

- eg.
- Health Education(Welfare provisions)
 - Level of unemployment
 - Funding for other interventions

2 Local Community/Council Level

- eg.
- Provision Of community services/programmes
 - Standard of housing, transport, parks. etc.
 - Support for community enhancement programmes

3 School Level

- eg.
- Fair and effective discipline
 - Social skills/anti-violence programmes
 - Children achieving success
 - High standards of behaviour

Figure 1:3 Types of Interventions for Behaviour Disordered Children

INTERVENTION APPROACHES

The diagram provides a model for understanding the various types of intervention approach that can be used to address the problem of behaviour disordered children.

Of the targeted interventions, Family Support Interventions and Preschool Interventions offer the best chance of preventing significant behavioural problems from developing. Primary School Intervention offers the last chance of intervening where there is a reasonable probability of success and before the child's behaviour problems start to have a significant and detrimental effect on school success and social development. It is also much more difficult to help parents regain control of and positively change a child's behaviour once the child is over about eight years old.

SPECIFIC CAUSAL FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BEHAVIOUR DISORDERS

Causes of children's problem behaviour vary from child to child and what causes one child to develop a behaviour problem may not have much influence on another child. Sometimes a single or fairly simple cause may be found, but often it can be a number of factors combining together that produce serious behaviour disorders, eg, a number of unsatisfactory influences in a child's home background or a strong willed child combined with an inconsistent parent.

It is useful in our understanding of the development of behaviour disorders to consider two sets of critical factors, some combination of which are generally regarded as the specific causal factors in the development of children's behaviour disorders.

1. **Factors within the child** - Just as children are born physically different from each other (due to genetic factors or factors during pregnancy and birth) so too they are likely to differ in characteristics such as activity level, temperament, health and perhaps predispositions towards certain behavioural or personality characteristics.
2. **Factors In the child's social environment** - Particularly the specific parenting practices used and how well the family functions and copes with everyday life.
3. **Critical events** - Such as sexual abuse incidents, family death, separation from or rejection by a parent. (these could be included under "the child's social environment" but are listed separately because such events can in some children result in significant behaviour problems even if no other causal factors are present).

1. FACTORS WITHIN THE CHILD

These factors acknowledge that there are individual differences in children. Some of these differences are likely to have a genetic basis, or be a result of prenatal factors - foetal alcohol syndrome and children born drug dependent would be serious examples of prenatal factors influencing a child's health and behaviour. Other differences develop as a result of a baby's early interactions with people and its environment and become established patterns of behaviour within a year or two of birth.

Poor health, allergies, reactions to certain foods or environmental conditions, sickness and certain medical conditions can all contribute to the development of behaviour problems but the most common factors within the child that are likely to lead to behavioural problems are behavioural characteristics.

Figure 1:4 illustrates just a few of the ways in which children may differ behaviourally.

Children who are passive, calm, compliant and flexible are not better children than those who are active, unsettled, strong willed and don't learn new behaviour patterns easily - but they are different and they are much, much easier to raise. Children who are active, unsettled, strong willed and inflexible require considerably more skill and effort on the part of the parent (and teacher) if they are to grow up without behavioural problems.

Experienced parents and teachers accept that they may need to use different strategies, or use some strategies much more consistently, or to put more time and effort into some children to prevent those children developing behavioural problems.