

Working with Discouraged or Defeated Learners

Understanding Social Development as it relates to school success:

During School Ages of 7-12

- Students face the dilemma of Industry vs. Inferiority (Competence)
- Main question in this stage: **Am I good at what I do?**

During this stage a child learns to master the more formal skills of life:

1. Relating with peers according to rules. Children at this age are becoming more aware of themselves as individuals. They work hard at “being responsible, being good and doing it right.”
2. Progress from free play to play that may be elaborately structured by rules and may demand formal teamwork, such as playing baseball.
3. At this stage, children are eager to learn and accomplish more complex skills (reading and math).
4. They also get to form moral values, recognize cultural and individual differences.

The child who, because of their success at earlier phases of social development: are trusting, autonomous, and full of initiative will learn easily enough to be industrious.

However, a child who had not successfully moved through early social development phases: are the mistrusting child will doubt the future. The shame-guilt filled child will experience defeat and inferiority.

At this stage children might express their independence by being disobedient, using back talk and being rebellious.

Children in this stage have to learn the feeling of success. If the child is allowed too little success, they will develop a sense of inferiority or incompetence.

Too much industry leads to narrow virtuosity (children who are not allowed to be children). A balance between industry and inferiority leads to competency.

Individuals react differently to adversity:

Internalizing

Shy or Withdrawn

Externalize

Verbal or Aggressive towards others.

What are the profiles of discouraged and defeated learners?

- Usually low in reading skills
- Some come from poverty or fragile homes that may have experienced many transitions in their lives (multiple moves to different schools resulting in different curriculums).
- They are not necessarily low in “ability” but may lack skills from lack of attendance or lack of educational support.
- They may reject certain learning experiences because they are – fragmented, irrelevant, confusing, and intellectually threatening. But kids **DO** want to learn. We need to discover the obstacles.
- Usually low in self-confidence, helplessness, and lack self-worth.
- They are avoiders. They avoid because of demands or threats, or because it’s confusing and unresponsive to their needs. They avoid contact and confrontations with students and adults because they are not confident of themselves. They may avoid school because they are, “behind”.
- They are distrustful of adults – in their life adults may have been unfair, unresponsive, or even abusive – mentally, intellectually, and/or physical. Trust of adults will only come from your demonstration of good faith, good intentions, good deeds, and your skill in helping them as a learner. Be patient.
- They may not see the future as bright or positive. Their life may be grim and have no cause to see the future any other way. They are much more likely to buy into short term goals.
- As students get older they become more discouraged as they become further behind in their academic skills. They may see themselves as “dumb” rather than unskilled. They start to lose hope that skills not yet learned can’t be learned.

- In fragile homes, their parents may be low skilled, low self-confidence, distrust institutions, avoidance, suspicious of future. Some parents may be grateful that another adult is finally helping their child but some fragile parents don't care and continue with damaging behaviors.
- Some come from homes of well-educated parents who don't understand why their child's discouraged and lacks interest. They often feel frustrated and defeated in finding answers to their child's discouragement.
- Emphasize skills that can be learned rather than "smarts" and insist on personal responsibility for success. Talk about what effort made it happen, specifically, and insist on pride in that effort and the increasing level of skills that follow.
- Discouraged learners don't see a relationship between effort and achievement but instead see success as a matter of luck or ease of task. They are students who see the world as *happening to them* and one over which they have little control, especially failures and success.
 - When they do poorly they blame it on something to which they have no control:
 - It was an impossible task
 - Bad luck
 - Bad day
 - An adult refused to help them
 - They are "dumb"
 - Same is true when they do well:
 - Good luck
 - Easy assignment
 - Wonderful teacher
- They don't take personal responsibility because they don't see the relationship. They traditionally don't learn from their mistakes and their success because they feel that life just happens to them. So, if you do not think your actions cause your effects, you take no pride in effort, and no personal responsibility for your actions....it doesn't make sense to.

How can we break the cycle of discouragement?

Students must:

1. Be with adults who like them and demonstrate it.
2. Feel valued and cared about.
3. Be taught to take themselves seriously as learners.
4. Know the expectations they have seen apply to others apply to them too (effort, attendance, and behavior).
5. Learn the pleasure of mental involvement.
6. Learn the satisfaction of hard work done well.
7. Experience classrooms free of negative competition and peer pressure.
8. Never feel anonymous.
9. Have clear evidence of accomplishment attributable to skill and effort (not to luck or easy work).

These students are discouraged and might feel threatened by school and school work- if you keep this in mind, your positive intentions will be communicated even when you are irritated and frustrated.

Adults must:

Behave:

Friendly
Enthusiastically
With a powerful sense of purpose
As an adult

Demonstrate:

Acceptance
Humor/Wit (not sarcasm)
Thinking skills
Expertise
Recognition of Effort & Accomplishment (Focus on present competence, not incompetence)
Maturity
Helpfulness (offer adequate assistance in meeting the expectations)

Be:

Kind
Firm (Clear, realistic, attainable expectations)
Organized (Clear sense of agenda, "Today we are going to...")
Compassionate
Tough Minded (Willing to respectfully and empathetically hold accountable)

Identify the Behavior that is interfering with Learning

- Are there any recurrent behavior patterns?
- Under what conditions is the student most successful?
- What conditions tend to trigger the problem behavior?
- What tends to hold the student's attention?

What are some behaviors that present difficulty between adults and students?

Type	Behavior	Possible Reason	How to Build Internal Responsibility
Bully	Hostile, sarcastic, aggressive, threatening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only way that has worked in the past • Frustrated • Low self-confidence • Poor role models in past • A method to get their own way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about sources of frustration, and other ways of dealing with it– we all get frustrated. • Discuss how these behaviors contribute to others avoiding them. • You are now a different role model (positive) – make that clear. • Talk about being on the same team and you are there to support them.
Silent	Passive, doesn't respond to suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wants to avoid • Unclear and uncertain of expectations • Fear of further failure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make avoidance impossible; deliver a monologue on your expectations. • Ask if they need things clarified, it's often necessary. • Slowly build trust that they won't fail with you if they make an effort. • Their fear is real but in most cases able to overcome.
Pointer	Takes everything personal, silent, complainer, withdraws	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A way to manipulate • Low skills • Lacks confidence in own emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Students that try hard have a chance at succeeding, give it a try." • "Skills can be learned; time to get on with it and make an effort." • Discuss other more effective methods such as talking openly about problem.
Clinging Vine	Dependent, wants to be taken care of, helpless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A way to avoid responsibility • Authoritarian models in past • Fear of failure • A way to manipulate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Point out your pleasure when they take responsibility. • Be patient; you have to build trust that you are not authoritarian. • Carefully point out how this contributes to failure. • Don't give in to helplessness.
It Won't Work	Deflates, optimism, negative, closed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive • Has been burned before by trying something new • Low self confidence so they try to bring others down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't compete; point out damage in comparing ourselves to others. • Carefully point out evidence that it might work, and the benefits to the student if it does. • Set up a no-loss situation; no fear; no penalty. • Slowly work on building self-confidence. • Praise for the things that they ARE good at.
Chip on Shoulder	Surly, quick temper, high emotional involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-image • Easily threatened • A way to avoid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Point out items to be proud of in spite of poor behavior now; concentrate on the present source of difficulty. • Carefully point out that you are not threatening and never have been; no reason for a chip. You are there to help and will be back each week.

Resiliency

An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.

Components that foster resiliency:

1. **Adult Support** – to have help from an adult either inside or outside of family.
2. **Anchor Belief** – religion, nature, meditation, and journal writing help people to stay focused and develop a sense of peace or acceptance.
3. **Action Experiences** – take action and build each small experience on another. Small steps and short term goals.
4. **Attitude of Hope** – develop an optimistic attitude, focus on good things and plan for the future.

Characteristics of a Resilient People

Sense of Humor	Communicator	Persistent
Flexible	Creative	Responsible
Problem-solver	Friendly	Positive
Goal-setter	Optimistic	

What can we do to make a difference in the lives of kids?

Provide a nurturing environment and ongoing supportive relationships. Focus on supporting students academically and reinforce resiliency skills. Use games and books to reinforce social/emotional skills.

1. **Help student's solve their own problems and reinforce responsibility.** By doing this you imply that kids aren't helpless victims, that they're powerful and can take control of many aspects of their lives.

Ask them:

- What is the situation?
- What have you done so far?
- What else can you do?
- What is your next step?

Problem Solving Tic-Tac-Toe

- a. Define the problem
- b. Use the Tic-Tac-Toe format to encourage students to come up with problem solving solutions.
- c. Take turns – you are Os and they are Xs. Place X or O each time you state a solution.
- d. End by picking the best solution. (Is it...fair, safe, and will it work?)

2. Connect with kids in order to resolve their inappropriate behavior.

- *Discouraged kids sometimes have been so neglected at home that they tend to see time as pretty much up to them to do what they want. They often behave not unlike very spoiled kids.*
- **Connect with them at a personal level** by discovering as much about possible about them. *Find out more than their problems, also their interests.*
- **Model expressing feelings, “I feel ___ when ___”.**

Conversation Skills Activities:

- Use a common game to practice conversation skills. Take turns asking questions. (What is your name? Do you have any pets? Do you like sports? What TV shows do you watch? Do you play video games?)

Compliment Games: Interview the students to get to know their interest inside and outside of school.

- Take turns giving and receiving complements and then taking a turn in the game of choice.
- You can complement appearance, behavior, abilities/skills in School, or abilities/skills away from School.

3. Understand a student’s attitude.

- *Do not criticize students for having a bad attitude. Of course they have a bad attitude. Their attitude toward school reflects their experience. For a student that has experienced a lot of failure, frustration, and discouragement in school, to have a positive attitude about school would be totally irrational. Yet these students are often scolded for their attitudes. Change their experience from failure to success (that is in our control) and their attitude will follow and so will their behavior.*

Managing Emotions and Feeling Games:

- Use Jenga or any game to practice identifying feelings and expressing them.
- Take turns pulling a brick and saying “I feel _____ when _____”.

Self Talk Game:

- Use the positive self talk worksheet and take turns saying positive self talk statements while playing a game.

Make social and emotional connections when reading with a student.

- “How do you think they felt?”
- “How would you feel if that was you?”
- “Have you ever felt _____?”
- “What would you say?”
- “How do you think they will solve this problem?” “What would you do?....Is it safe, fair, will that work?”

4. **Be receptive and listen patiently when children reach out for help.** – students become more resilient when they have access to healthy, caring people.
- Model good communication skills.
 - Listen without interruptions and judgments.
 - Share an open and honest expression of feelings.
 - You might ask, “seems like something is bothering you today, would you like to talk about it? Is there anything I can do to help?”
 - Talk with the teacher, counselor, or an administrator immediately if a child shares an abusive or neglect situation.
5. **Emphasize skills that can be learned rather than “smarts” and insist on personal responsibility for success.**
- Learn from, rather than feeling defeated by mistakes.
 - Talk about what effort made it happen, specifically, and insist on pride in that effort and the increasing level of skills that follow.

Discouraged and Defeated Learner *Our Other Youth by Jerry Conrath