

DUAL VULNERABILITIES

The child with special educational needs and low self- esteem

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The issues that a child with learning difficulties has to deal with every day can be many, and will vary from child to child, according to the nature and extent of the difficulties. A common factor, however, and one of the most difficult to deal with, is their vulnerability to feelings of low self-esteem and self-confidence.

As well as being difficult for the child, it can also be awful for a parent to cope with. It is heartbreaking to see your child's happiness slip away with each passing day. One day you are looking on as your happy, lively toddler runs readily into nursery, full of anticipation and eager to learn, and the next you are helpless as your very unhappy child cries himself to sleep at night, hating school and wondering why he is so stupid. It is a living nightmare, living under a double edged sword of wanting to do what's best for your child, seeing what the problem is and being helpless to prevent it.

These are not isolated occurrences among children, but a major problem which so often accompanies learning difficulties, one which should not be ignored or underestimated by parents, teachers or other associated professionals. A child who struggles both in school and out is doubly vulnerable, one with learning issues and often related social problems. This is a child who may suffer, often in silence, and will suffer daily from increasing feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy.

These feelings leave a child open to becoming a prime target for bullying, by those who are quick to pick up on a child's differences and weaknesses. In turn, they only serve to echo and seemingly validate the child's own doubts and fears, which quickly lead to feelings of hopelessness and frustration that can, in turn, lead to anxiety and anger. If you get called stupid often enough you start to believe it.

Children with Auditory Processing Disorder and other so-called invisible disabilities are particularly vulnerable because they have none of the outward signs of disability, like those who have physical disabilities, or blindness or deafness. They will appear, to unsuspecting adults and unknowing children, as being just the same as all the other children in their class, in their street. They may have communication difficulties which will leave them disadvantaged; they might often misunderstand the words and intentions of others, and be misunderstood in return. They will suffer greatly as a result.

Often the first indications that there is something wrong, in any child, (whether because of bullying, self-esteem issues or social stress factors), are instances of tearful or angry outbursts at school or at home, seemingly over-reacting to incidents that they would normally ignore. Maybe there will be uncharacteristic bad behaviour, attention-seeking and increased sensitivity to criticism. They could be reluctant to go out to play, or lose interest in favourite

games or hobbies. Perhaps there might even be stress-related indicators like aggression, nightmares or bedwetting, stress-related migraines, stuttering or stammering, occasional vocal or physical tics at times of stress (unlike those of Tourette's Syndrome, which are generally present all the time in varying degrees).

Possibly they might take comfort in routines or reverting to toys, books or activities like thumb-sucking, anything that brought them comfort when they were younger, taking them back to a time when they felt safer, more in control. All of these things can be symptoms of a bigger problem, which in some cases can even lead to school phobia and in the worst cases post traumatic stress, and can even set the child on a downward spiral to depression and worse. They should not be ignored.

This lack of control over their lives is the hardest thing to deal with, especially if they see themselves and their difficulties as the cause of it. By the time these children reach their teens and other pressures are forced upon them, the load can become unbearable. In older children and teens this can lead to self-harm, anorexia, bulimia, alcohol and drug use to help regain control or to punish themselves. This is not said to shock, this is fact.

All children who exhibit behaviours like this do so for a reason, which is that whatever has caused them to do so, they need help. If they are not given help, the situation will worsen, especially given that APD and other difficulties do not go away when you leave school, they are present through life, in all aspects of life. So too are the feelings of failure and helplessness, in the workplace, and in relationships.

Gifted children also have enormous pressure put upon them to achieve their potential. These pressures are often too much and they end up under-achieving, disaffected young people who drop out of school or college unable to cope with others' expectations of them. You only have to look at the rise in depression and suicide among teenagers to see how vulnerable they already are, without any added pressure being brought to bear. Giftedness, like disability, is also something that does not go away at 16.

For the dual exceptionalities child, who has learning difficulties and who is also bright, able or gifted, this vulnerability is doubled, because they know in their heart of hearts they are capable of so much more than their difficulties allow them to achieve. Sometimes the happy ignorance of not knowing one's potential is a blessing. Not so for these children. They might set themselves impossibly high goals that their intellect demands but that their difficulties render unattainable, all of which puts them in a constant position of failure. Or they might eventually come to think they are as stupid as others say they are, and lose all confidence in themselves and their abilities. As a parent it is unbearable to see your child giving up on themselves and the world around them.

Parents and educators need to be aware of the dangers that prolonged exposure to stress can do to a child. They should look out for them and be

ready to step in to alleviate the stressors and help the child regain their self-esteem, with positive reinforcement, praise and encouragement. A teacher who is tempted to imply that a child is lazy, slow or has a bad attitude to work, should think very carefully of the impact such words may have. It is unacceptable, especially as children who see teachers behaving in this way will copy such attitudes to perpetuate bullying, both in and out of the classroom, as they think it is OK to do so.

A child doesn't suddenly change their personality overnight without good reason. Instead of punishing uncharacteristic bad behaviour, parents and teachers should ask why it is happening. Instead of telling the child they are under-achieving, they should find out why and work with the child to help them to achieve. Instead of isolating children with difficulties and allowing other children to reject and exclude them, they should ensure that other children in their class or street understand why the child behaves as they do, why they cannot communicate in the same way, and help them to find friendship and support from their peers.

Be aware of every child in your care, whether you are a parent or a teacher, SENCo etc. Help is available from GPs, Educational Psychologist, Children's Services or even the Samaritans. But the first step in gaining help comes from the people closest to them.

Our vulnerable children have been isolated long enough. Please help them to learn to cope with the doubled emotional distress caused by their difficulties and poor self-esteem, and the accompanying educational and social pressures. The signs are there if you are willing to look.

We live in a society where achievement is deemed to be paramount. As a parent, I would settle for my children to be blessed with happiness.