

1

The Struggling Child

Understanding Your Child's Behavioral–Emotional Problems

Child difficulties like disrupting the classroom, arguing with adults, fighting with siblings, moodiness, excessive worrying, rejection by peers, and/or underachieving in school, to name just a few, are indicators of behavioral–emotional problems. Such behaviors and/or emotional symptoms can harm your child's functioning in everyday life, which in turn stresses you out and probably has a negative effect on family life. You are likely reading this book and perhaps working with a practitioner due to similar concerns and out of a desire to get your child and family back on track.

To do that you need to develop a specific plan of action that is exactly what your son or daughter needs to be successful (see Chapter 2). But first you have to understand your child's behavioral–emotional problems and begin thinking of them from a developmental point of view.

Understanding Your Child's Behavioral–Emotional Problems

Almost all children demonstrate the problems described in this section, to some extent. It is the **frequency** and **magnitude** of the problems that make the difference between a normal bump in the road and something to be concerned about. For example, habitual defiance is much more frequent than average and is a concern. A child who throws a chair while being defiant is demonstrating a problem behavior of much greater magnitude than run-of-the-mill talking back. Determining whether a child has crossed the line in frequency and magnitude for a particular problem is, unfortunately, a judgment call that is tough for many parents to make. This is where a qualified practitioner can help. Experienced practitioners have seen many children with problems and are also well versed in the symptoms of behavioral–emotional problems and when they should be addressed.

Following is a list of common characteristics of children that are problematic when their frequency and magnitude are high:

- **Hyperactivity**—can't sit still and is constantly in motion.
- **Impulsivity**—fails to think before acting, exhibits behavior such as blurting out, shoving in line, or even stealing something tempting.
- **Inattention**—is distracted, has difficulty focusing, and demonstrates low effort and motivation to complete tasks and stay focused.
- **Defiance**—argues with or disregards adult directives.
- **Rule-violating behavior**—violates commonly accepted standards of behavior such as breaking curfew, stealing, vandalizing, running away from home, skipping school.
- **Aggression**—displays actions that harm or intimidate another—*physical aggression*, like punching, hitting, and kicking, or *relational aggression*, like spreading rumors or excluding someone from a group—both of which can be expressed as *reactive* (spur of the moment) or *proactive* (planned).
- **Moodiness**—exhibits depression-like sadness, discouragement, and hopelessness; and/or euphoric excitability, mania, or irritability.
- **Anxiety**—worries, is physically tense, and avoids certain places, people, or events because of nervousness.
- **Emotionally overreactive**—acts aroused, agitated, and “ready for action.”
- **Emotionally underreactive**—acts calm, with low guilt and/or concern for others (sometimes with lower empathy).
- **Underachievement**—experiences delays in reading, arithmetic, written language, and other areas of academic proficiency.
- **Social difficulties**—has a hard time with friends and peer interactions, possibly including being socially troublesome to others and/or withdrawn and shy.

These behavioral–emotional problems can all range from mild to severe, and some children may have more than one of them. It is unfortunately all too common that a child starts out with one or two of these problems, which lead to setbacks in everyday life, and then they “snowball,” creating more problems over time. Although there are gender differences in the incidence of some of these problems, both boys and girls can exhibit any of them.

These behavioral–emotional problems may be the reasons you have sought assistance for your child, as they are for many parents. More often than not, these problems end up being the “target” of an intervention. It’s essential, though, that you accurately identify the problems your child is experiencing before deciding what kind of help he or she needs. Here too a practitioner can help guide you.

Understanding Your Child’s Developmental Struggles

The underlying premise of the “Struggling Kids” program is that a child with behavioral–emotional problems like the ones listed above is struggling with **psychological development**. That is, the child is behind in accumulating typical skills, or competencies, in the behavioral, social, emotional, and academic arenas. This is why the “Struggling Kids” program focuses on skills building: To be successful, the struggling child needs to be given the ability to master tasks that are part of typical child development.

To get a better idea of where your child stands in psychological development, review the *Child Psychological Development* chart. Compare the struggling and successful child in each area. Try to pinpoint your child’s developmental progress. Is your child behind and struggling or on track and successful? Keep in mind that although your child may be at a certain chronological age (e.g., elementary school age), he or she may be at a younger developmental age (e.g., preschool), and if so, that means that your child is behind. If you’re not sure where your child fits on the developmental path for any domain, try to think of examples of your child’s behavior that prompt you to say that your child is struggling; a practitioner can guide you, if you need additional expertise in this area.

Child Psychological Development

Child Behavioral Development: Learning to follow reasonable external directions and rules and to internalize a moral and honest code of conduct

Age	Struggling child	Successful child
Infant/toddler	Irritable/fussy and/or unresponsive to parent. Often tantrums and whines.	Easygoing and responsive to parent. Manageable “terrible 2’s.”

Age	Struggling child	Successful child
Preschool	Often disobeys caregiver's directions. Often violates house rules.	Usually obeys caregiver's directions. Usually follows rules at house.
Elementary school	Often violates school rules; often acts before thinking. Often engages in dishonest behavior.	Usually follows rules at school; can think before acting. Has developed an internal code of honest conduct.
Adolescence	Often violates societal rules. Unaware of own behavior and its impact on others.	Usually follows rules of society. Aware of own behavior and its impact on others.

Child Social Development: Bonding with others and learning social skills

Age	Struggling child	Successful child
Infant/toddler	Insecure attachment or bond with parent.	Secure attachment or bond with parent.
Preschool	Mostly negative interactions with parents and peers. Poor social skills.	Mostly positive interactions with parents and peers. Good social skills.
Elementary school	Mostly negative interactions or withdrawn with peers and teachers. Often affiliates with negative peers. Ineffective in solving social problems.	Mostly positive interactions with peers and teachers. Affiliates with positive peers. Solves social problems effectively.
Adolescence	Often engages in negative activities with peers or is withdrawn. Rejects family and has poor family relationships.	Engages in positive activities with peers. "Launches" from family but maintains strong family ties.

Child Emotional Development: Learning to understand/express feelings, think rational or helpful thoughts, and regulate stress-related emotions

Age	Struggling child	Successful child
Infant/toddler	Displays mostly negative basic emotions. Expresses negative emotions through play.	Displays all basic emotions. Expresses a wide range of emotions through play.

Age	Struggling child	Successful child
Preschool	Verbally unexpressive and keeps feelings inside.	Verbally expresses simple emotions.
Elementary school	Fears persist. Doesn't understand, express, and control intense emotions. Mostly negative and unhelpful thoughts about self and others.	Overcomes most fears. Understands, expresses, and controls intense emotions. Mostly positive and helpful thoughts about self and others.
Adolescence	Negative and unhealthy identity emerging. Often depressed, anxious, or angry.	Positive and healthy identity emerging. Often happy and satisfied.

Child Academic Development: Learning self-directed academic behaviors and pursuing educational opportunities

Age	Struggling child	Successful child
Infant/toddler	Apprehensive about environment. Avoids new situations.	Explores environment. Is curious and inquisitive.
Preschool	Engages in excessive television and video games versus looking at books. Poor adjustment to school setting. Indifferent about learning.	Enjoys looking at books. Good adjustment to school setting. Excited about learning.
Elementary school	Inattentive, off-task, doesn't complete tasks. Can't manage time, organize, and plan to get schoolwork done.	Concentrates, stays on task, gets tasks done. Can manage time, organize, and plan to get schoolwork done.
Adolescence	No particular special skills or interests. No viable vocational or career plans.	Consolidating special skills and interests. Engaging in vocational or career planning and preparation.

Because children don't grow up in a vacuum, it's important to take into account how the parent and family contribute to a child's development. In this book the well-being of the parent and family are considered so that the plan can also address any stress-related problems within the family that might influence the child. Therefore, you need to know if you as a parent or your family as a unit is meeting the challenges of everyday family life. Are you **stressed** or **coping**? See the *Parent and Family Well-Being* chart to get a better idea.

Parent and Family Well-Being

Parent Well-Being: Personal functioning of parent(s)

Stressed parent	Coping parent
Overwhelmed by everyday challenges and problems.	Managing everyday challenges and problems.
Marriage or intimate partner relationship problems.	Satisfactory marriage or intimate partner relationship.
Overwhelmed by parenting responsibilities.	Keeping up with parenting responsibilities.
Limited family or friend support system.	Supportive family and/or friends.

Family Well-Being: Functioning of family relationships

Stressed family	Coping family
Distant parent–child relationship.	Close parent–child relationship.
Lack of routines and/or rituals.	Predictable routines and rituals.
Mostly negative (coercive) parent–child interactions.	Mostly positive parent–child interactions.
Mostly negative family communication and inability to resolve conflict.	Mostly positive family communication and ability to resolve conflict.

Knowing the Power of Protective Factors

Many parents wonder what causes developmental struggles in a child and whether anything can be done to make things better. A combination of genetic vulnerabilities and environmental stresses causes a child's psychological developmental struggles. As a result of genetic and environmental influences, the central nervous system of a struggling child may be different from that of a successful child.

Fortunately the effects of genetic vulnerabilities and environmental stresses are not etched in stone. **Protective factors**, such as those listed in the chart on page 19, can shield the child from genetic or environmental risks. In other words, these protective factors can increase the odds that an at-risk child can still be successful. The greater the number of protective factors, the greater the chance that the child will reclaim normal development.

Protective Factors That Influence a Child's Development

Area of influence	Specific protective factors associated with successful development
Child	Behavioral and emotional regulation skills Social skills Intellectual ability Academic skills and success Positive self-perception and self-efficacy Faith, hope, and a sense of meaning in life
Parent/family	Close relationship with a stable adult Supportive and authoritative parenting Family with predictable routines and rituals Positive parent–child interactions Positive and stable family environment
Peer	Accepted by children who have positive influence Associations with children who have positive influence
Contextual	Attends and is bonded to school Lives in safe and organized neighborhoods Opportunities for school, religious, and community activities that have positive influence

Skills-building strategies can help a child get along better in everyday life and can boost protective factors. Many of the protective factors listed in the chart are essentially skills (e.g., behavioral and emotional regulation skills) or can be the by-products of the success that comes with having such skills (e.g., positive parent–child interactions). The bottom line is that a skills-building approach can enable a struggling child to make progress and succeed. There is room for optimism and hope if you take effective action by helping your child build developmental skills!

What Is the Next Step?

Having read this chapter, you should now have a better understanding of your struggling child. For whatever reason, your child may be behind in skills development and is now struggling. Most children learn developmental skills implicitly through everyday interactions with parents and others. **But a child who is behind needs to**

have those developmental skills taught explicitly. A child can be taught skills to help him or her shift from struggling to successful. In addition, parents and family members can be taught skills to help them move from stressed to coping. In this process protective factors will gain a boost that will keep your child and family on track. The next chapter will guide you in creating a skills-building plan of action for your child and family.