

Introduction

Children Haven't Changed; Childhood Has

Teachers across America are confronted daily with student behaviors they rarely encountered 15 or 20 years ago. We may have had one, possibly two, troubled and troublesome youngsters per class, but when half, or more, of a classroom contributes to repeated disruptions, our energy and patience are exhausted.

One can hear it in the teachers' lounge and read it in print: teachers are burning out and leaving the field.

While we may agree that student behaviors are distressing, insights into why this increase is occurring are numerous and vary depending on the source. Sociologists, mental health professionals, child developmentalists, and criminologists offer differing explanations. Even politicians are attempting to declare causes and create legislation to control the behaviors.

One truth is certain: no one can offer real solutions until the root causes are clarified. Furthermore, reacting to the symptoms will not generate lasting resolutions and improvements.

Societal changes that have profoundly affected childhood experiences for America's children have filtered into families and neighborhoods over the last two decades while we, the adults, were busily tending to our own children, family, and career. As we steadily developed adult coping skills, it was natural not to look back at the societal changes we had accommodated and learned to cope with.

However, the impact of these shifts on young children's sense of security and sense of connectedness significantly correlates with the behavioral changes that have so distressingly altered our roles and careers as educators. Consider the following societal changes over the past 20 years:

- Frequent images of violent, horrifying events in television news, movies, and other electronic entertainment
- Terrorists attacks within our nation
- More and more two-career families and children under one year old with mothers in the work force
- Economic shifts that prompt multiple jobs or joblessness for families

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- Increasing use of alcohol and drugs, particularly crack cocaine, which can dismantle maternal behaviors and care
- More family mobility, more separation from extended families, more grandparents raising grandchildren
- More-marked concentration and isolation of poverty in urban and some rural areas
- Increases in the number of children growing up with one parent absent and the economic challenges that brings
- Increases in child abuse and neglect
- Homelessness

For many youngsters, these societal changes have altered how they see their world and how they see themselves in that world. Children growing up amid these many changes will certainly present different needs and respond to school personnel very differently from previous generations, who grew up when experiences were more predictable. Collectively these numerous changes have contributed to many, many children's deduction that adults can no longer guarantee total safety, an absolute and universal developmental requirement.

Assuredly, none of us would allow ourselves to look directly into the eyes of a youngster we care about and say, "I can assure you nothing bad is ever going to happen to you!" This reality has changed our relations with children today, whether we realize it or not. A valued and essential portion of our traditional role as adults used to be keeping children, our own and all others, safe.

Consequently, many youngsters are making adaptations, albeit maladaptations, in order to survive in an insecure world (Garbarino, 1995). It is these developmental adaptations that are generating many of the stress-driven behaviors educators encounter today. Acknowledging this correlation does not imply these behaviors are acceptable or appropriate. It does mean that if the field of education wants to reduce or eliminate them, we need to understand the root causes.

The incredible advances in electronic imaging in the past decade illuminate our understanding of the intricate timeline of brain development. For example, the research by Allan N. Schore (Solomon & Siegel, 2003) on the prefrontal cortex indicates a surge of development between eight and 12 weeks after birth. At this time the infant has the visual acuity to clearly see the facial expressions of a prime caregiver. As the caregiver mirrors and mimics the infant's facial expressions, which are often more like contortions, as they lock eyes, the adult is stimulating the infant's neural development in the prefrontal cortex during the process referred to as attachment.

The key significance of this early, early relationship experience is that the prefrontal cortex is the scaffolding on which infants build their lifetime capacity for self-regulation, for stress management, and for dealing with rapidly changing environments. The vital emotion of empathy will emanate eventually from this same area of the brain.

All of these developmental capacities are directly implicated in the student behaviors educators find most distressing and frustrating, yet the root causes began long, long before the children ever entered a school. The societal changes affecting this process of attachment point to two early relationship issues: mothers returning to the workforce soon after birth of a child and drug use interfering with the attachment process. Children have absolutely no control over these circumstances, yet their neurological circuitry bears the imprint.

Sometimes it helps to remember this remote trail of circumstances when confronted with students' belligerence and volatility. They are operating out of their prewired neurobiology. This insight does not imply the behavior should be condoned, but it does give an educator an alternative to taking it personally, a major cause of teacher burnout.

This book presents and applies valuable insights from the field of neurobiology, and readers will find neurological terminology that is not generally used in educational literature. For this reason, a glossary is included.