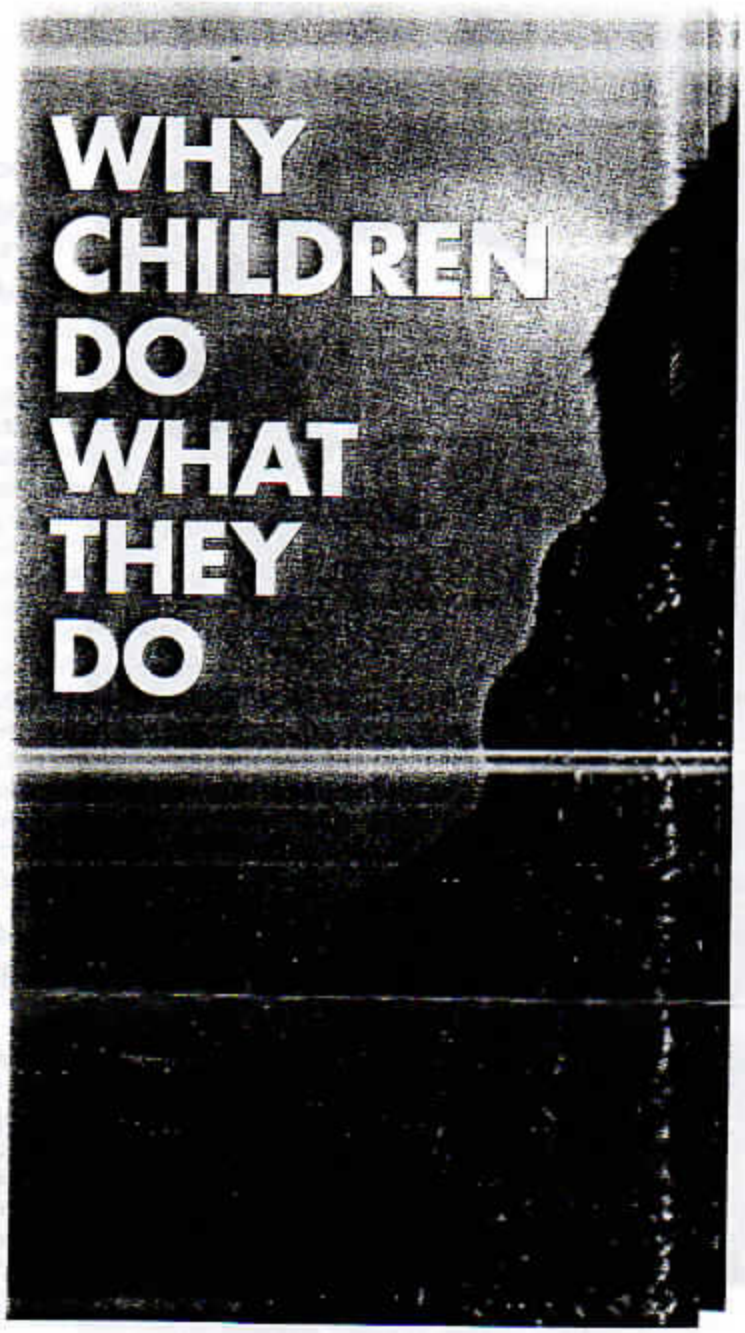
WHY CHILDREN DO WHAT THEY DO



Children sometimes do seemingly inexplicable things. Consider these behaviors, which we have observed at schools in New Haven, Conn.:

- Several kindergartners routinely disrupted school assembly programs.
- A 7-year-old filled his pockets with paper clips, pencils, and other items from his teacher's desk, found her in the hallway, and—his pockets bulging with the evidence of "the crime"—asked her a question as if nothing had happened.
- A third-grader never looked or smiled at her teacher for eight months and did just enough work to get by.
- On his first day at school, an 8-year-old transfer student kicked his teacher in the leg and ran out of the building.
- A 12-year-old whose behavior had improved a great deal during the semester began to pick fights with other children just before the winter break. After a hallway fight, he walked into his classroom, knocked over his desk, and stood in challenging defiance of all
- A seventh-grader was sullen and hostile in the classroom, refusing to answer questions or do homework. Yet, in the hallways and on the playground, he appeared friendly.
- A 16-year-old entered her junior year with a spectacular academic and social record, and everyone expected that she would be accepted at the most competitive colleges in the land. Instead, she had a terrible junior year and was not accepted by any top colleges.

What does this behavior mean? Are these children bad, uncooperative, rebellious? Do they have low academic achievement potential? These assumptions are made all too often in many schools. And all too often, the only way teachers know how to respond is to scold, punish, or exhort the students or expect less of them. Even when these efforts are well intentioned, however, they are seldom effective. But why do students do what they do? And how can the school staff respond in ways that will be helpful and, at the same time, promote a safe and orderly school environment?

Teachers can only be helpful if they know more about how children develop and respond to challenges in their lives. When teachers better understand the inextricable link between development and learning—and how conditions in children's lives and in school can either pose obstacles or help children grow—they will be in a better position to respond in appropriate and useful ways.

Student tasks, caretaker roles

Children are born totally dependent, but they are expected to become increasingly independent and capable of interdependent, responsible relationships in an open, democratic society. By the age of 18, they are expected to be able to carry out all adult tasks and responsibilities—work, live in and raise families, participate in a constructive way in the institutions of our democratic society, and become lifelong learners.

To achieve these tasks, they must grow along at least six critical developmental pathways: physical, social-interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and intellectual-cognitive. Children are best able to grow in all these ways when their interactions with caretakers lead to a sense of belonging and comfort. This usually produces the security and confidence children need to take the chances that are involved in learning. In the process, they gain knowledge and skills related to all the developmental pathways. We now know from research what some behavioral scientists have long argued: that these conditions promote the development of the brain and full expression of endowed intelligence—"the sense we are born with."

The sense of belonging and growth should start at home when parents provide children with their basic needs. The attachment and bond that forms between them enables parents to help children grow along all the developmental pathways. When growth and development are going well, children go off to school prepared to interact, attach, and bond with school

Understanding how kids develop and respond to challenges is the first step in understanding their behavior

By James P. Comer, M.D.

people and their program. As a result, educators can help them continue to develop and motivate them to successfully manage the social environment and learn academic material.

While children are born learning and trying to make sense of their world, academic material is not inherently important or meaningful to a young child. After all, letters of the alphabet are no more than scratches on a pad to a child until people who are important give those scratches meaning, thus motivating the child to learn how to use them in words and sentences. The benefits of academic learning eventually motivate children to learn for themselves. But even then, important others at home, at school, and in the world must continue to reinforce academic learning in various ways.

When children are frustrated or not able to manage their social or academic challenges, they often act up and act out in troublesome ways. Some are not secure in their relationships with caretakers or don't sense belonging at home or in school. Some are fearful and lack confidence; some lack the skills to express their needs or the patience or control to wait until their needs can be met. And in far too many cases children's burdens are greater than their state of development can bear.

Immature and troublesome behavior gives adult caretakers an opportunity to help children learn how to manage themselves and the situations they are in. When caretakers are helpful, they gain credibility and power to help the child the next time. But some (maybe most) adults respond to troublesome behavior with punishment, control, and, eventually, lowered expectations. While punishment is sometimes necessary, it can also promote rebellion and limit a child's efforts to develop self-management skills. At worst, punishment can make children passive followers who are vulnerable to exploitation by others, rather than independent thinkers acting in their own behalf. Helping them manage and grow is much more effective.

Using a developmental lens

Looking through a developmental lens, we can see reasons for the problem behaviors we observed in New Haven schools. As for the kindergartners who disrupted school assemblies, 5-year-olds have not developed the capacity to sit still for very long. When our mental health staff provided this bit of knowledge to the teachers, they came up with a solution: They brought the kindergartners in after everybody else was seated, put them on the program first, and let them sit and listen to others for a short time. An intermission was scheduled so the children could leave before they became disruptive. And because the children did not lose control, they experienced success rather than failure—helpful to their self-esteem.

The 7-year-old with the bulging pockets simply didn't know whether his teacher liked him or not, whether he belonged. Children can't articulate this concern; instead they act it out. Once the teacher understood, and expressed this with a smile, an arm around the shoulder, and so on, the boy felt he belonged. This early school-age period is the time when children establish habit patterns that can stay with them for the rest of their lives. It is a period when children learn to work, to accomplish and achieve things. They do so by imitating people they like because they sense that these people like them or at least are fair.

The "no-look, no-smile" child had had bad experiences with adults at home—many in and out of her life, some abusive. She didn't trust any adults. But with a caring, positive, responsible teacher, she finally smiled. Continuity of relationships with important caretakers in a good environment helps chil-

dren grow—particularly if the children have had difficult previous relationships. When the teachers in this elementary school learned this, they decided to stay with the same children for two years. Some children who made no academic gain the first year made up to two years of gain the second, and behavior problems all but disappeared. Continuity, trust, and support are important for all of us, but particularly in the preteen years before a core positive sense of self, personal initiative, and direction have been established.

The 8-year-old transfer student who kicked his teacher had been pulled out of a tightly knit, supportive community and placed in a threatening environment. His anxiety overwhelmed him, and he did what healthy children do; he took action—fight and flight. When the teachers thought about the behavioral issues involved, they changed school procedures to provide orientation and support for new students. Behavior problems decreased, and academic achievement increased. This simple intervention was based on our knowledge about what children need to develop and function well.

The 12-year-old who knocked over his desk had a heavy burden. His father had had his Christmas pass from jail revoked.

Beginning with child development points the way to best policy and practice.

Disappointed, angry, and powerless, the boy was acting out his feelings. But rather than send him to the principal for punishment, the teacher asked, "Johnny, what's the matter? What's going on? You haven't been acting like yourself recently." This tough guy began to cry and explained the situation. The teacher told him she understood how he must feel but helped him understand that taking his feelings out on other people only made things worse.

She helped him write a letter to his father expressing his own disappointment and his father's and saying he would look forward to seeing him when he was able to come home. The student was empowered. His teacher became all the more important and influential. Instead of controlling and punishing him, she helped him gain social, psycho-emotional, ethical, linguistic, and intellectual capacities and skills that enabled him to manage the situation and feel better about himself.

The sullen seventh-grader was hostile in the classroom to keep people away so they would not discover that he could not read. He was not a mature problem solver—simply a challenged child who needed adults with the skills to get past his immature response and provide him help.

The parents of the 16-year-old girl were divorced in the summer before her junior year. Her academic performance dropped because she couldn't concentrate, probably due to anxiety and depression. Several of her teachers thought she was just being rebellious, and some thought she was afraid of going away from home. She received no help with the kind of problem that most mature adults have difficulty handling.

What can schools do?

Schools can't do it all, of course—teachers and administrators are not psychologists or social workers, after all. But schools can do much more than they generally do. For one thing, school people can learn to use a developmental lens in working with children who do not have special problems and needs as well as those who do. Recently I observed a show-and-tell exercise designed to help 8-year-olds learn to present and hold a conversation. The difference in capacity and style between shy children and highly expressive children of about the same age and ability level was remarkable. The teacher skillfully helped each child be successful. Educators must know how to create conditions in the school and interact with students in ways that will bring out the best in each child.

The knowledge, skills, and interactions that helped the children I have described are needed in order to help *all* children develop and learn. It is not complicated, deep stuff. But it does require us to "think development" and use related knowledge and skills in all aspects of education. We too often think of students as good or bad, smart or dumb, rather than ask ourselves, "How can I respond that will help this child manage challenges in ways that will promote development and learning?"

Most educators want to help children, but they are not able to support development often enough because schools of education, state departments of education, and legislators—indeed, most of the public—believe academic learning is simply a matter of pouring information into children's heads. Those with the best brains will get it and the others will not, people believe, and that's to be expected—in fact, it's OK. It was never OK, but we got away with it when our economy required that only a small proportion of the population be well educated. Now that almost everyone must be well educated, we must think and work with students differently.

Despite that urgent need, too many people—from the general public to researchers and policy makers—ignore the research showing that academic achievement and desirable behavior are inextricably linked to good overall development, and that we must promote good development through helpful adult-child interactions to get the kind of outcomes we want.

Because we do not appreciate the link between development and academic learning, we don't do enough as a society to help children have a good preparatory experience at home. And because most schools of education do not appreciate the link, they do not prepare teachers and administrators to create the conditions that enable children to have a good developmental experience at school. Once they're in the classroom, most teachers do not receive the support they need to work in a way that supports student development. And yet, changes at home and in school that support child development would do more to prepare students to behave well in school and in life.

and to achieve high test scores, than most of the testing, accountability, class-size reduction, and other changes that are being proposed and instituted.

The school staffs who made successful interventions in the cases I described used the conceptual and operational framework produced by the Yale Child Study Center's School Development Program to create a good school climate that, in turn, made their interactions with the students effective. When the climate is one of distrust, anger, and alienation, adult/child interactions range from less effective to harmful. The Child Study Center model enables educators, parents, and students to collaborate, plan, share, and coordinate activities in support of student development and learning.

What can school boards do?

I am often told that school boards can't do much to affect administrator and teacher preparation. This might be so in the short run, but not in the long run. School boards select the leaders. Superintendents who "think development" and select principals and others who do so can create schools that work for children. This will require schools of education, as well as alternative preparation programs, to prepare future educators not only to think in terms of child development, but also to be able to use the knowledge and skills needed to promote it. But if school boards simply take the leaders they can get without considering whether these leaders can help children develop—without demanding better—little will change.

Of course, before they can select leaders who can promote development, school board members need to know how children develop, recognize the connection between development and learning, and understand how the organization and management of a school and school system can facilitate or limit student development. They must also appreciate how their own board policies, and those of the state, facilitate or limit student development. For example, student growth takes place best where there is a continuity of leadership and staff, which is rare in many school systems today. Administrator and staff turnover and discontinuity are affected by numerous policy factors related to selection, professional development, and financial support—all of which are within the school board's control.

School board members have more immediate influence over selection than preparation, but selection is not an easy task. A child development instructor at a large college told me about a part-time graduate student who asked why he had to take her course—after all, he was a principal. Of course, principals must know how children learn in order to create conditions that facilitate good development. The fact that this principal didn't realize this made his leadership shortcomings obvious. But that is often not the case. Many talk a good game but are not prepared to work in the less authoritarian and more collaborative ways that support the development of students, classrooms, schools, or school systems.

"Command and control" is still the norm in too many school systems, but modern leadership requires collaboration and facilitation. Too many leaders want to put their stamp on the organization rather than build on successes and help staff, parents, and students develop. And these days, leaders often don't have time to help anybody grow—many of them stand a good chance of losing their jobs if they can't find a magic bullet that will improve test scores yesterday.

There is no magic bullet. A school board that understands how children develop and learn—and understands how organizations must operate to make that possible—can be helpful in encouraging local, state, and national policy makers to do what is in the best interest of children rather than what looks and sounds good politically.

How does a school board begin to think in terms of child development and apply its principles? Almost a decade ago the New Haven school board invited several members of our staff to discuss child development issues and implications with them. Eventually, the mayor, who sits on the board, appointed a member of the Child Study Center to serve on the board. And now two Southern Connecticut State University faculty members who appreciate the importance of organizing and managing schools to promote child development also serve on the board. Several years ago the superintendent spent a sabbatical year at the Yale Child Study Center. Thus, the consciousness comes from within.

But there are other ways to do it. A school board member in Michigan, for example, encouraged the regional school of education to provide a child development course for school board members. Elsewhere, district social workers, psychologists, special education teachers, and others could provide valuable insights for school boards, staff, and parents alike. These professionals can be most helpful when they know how to create structures that promote a good school climate as well as how to help individual students. Currently, most are stuck off in the corner trying to "fix" problem children, rather than helping us better understand and meet the needs of all children.

These child development and behavior professionals can help school boards think about what's good for kids in making decisions about personnel, programs, and budget. They can help board members challenge inappropriate considerations driven by politics, friendship, kinship, gender, and other factors. Indeed, when policy makers understand that self-expression and opportunities to be competitive and creative under adult supervision can help children develop and learn, they are more likely to protect the arts and athletics in a financial crunch. And when policy makers understand child development, they are more likely to see the wisdom of giving teachers and administrators the out-of-classroom time to think and plan ways to meet student needs.

In short, beginning with child development points the way to best policy and practice.

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