

# PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION

*AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL*

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## The Feeling De Jour: A Therapist's and Teacher's Perspective on the Emotional Impairments of Exceptional Children

Craig A. Knippenberg LCSW, M.Div. and Philippe Ernewein, MA

*Combining a clinical and school-based perspective, the authors of this article examine how the critical ingredients of student affect and classroom environment impacts the learning of exceptional students. Those diagnosed with ADHD, LD, ASD, Bipolar, OCD, process their emotions in often more intense, more impulsive and more life inhibiting manners than those students without diagnosed exceptionalities. Exceptional children have a stronger reactivity to environmental stimuli (Feifer). These amygdala driven responses take their toll on the families, the classroom peer relationships and the individual's own sense of self and result in failed relationships and failed academic attainment.*

Researchers, parents, educators and the children/teens themselves have long recognized that exceptional students, those diagnosed with ADHD, LD, ASD, Bipolar, OCD, process their emotions in often more intense, more impulsive and more life inhibiting manners than those students without diagnosed exceptionalities. Exceptional children have a stronger reactivity to environmental stimuli (Feifer). These amygdala driven responses take their toll on the families, the classroom, peer relationships and the individual's own sense of self and result in failed relationships and failed academic attainment.

### Notes From the Family: Derek Wants To Go

Take for example, Derek, age 6, who came home from school and asked his mother if she could take him to Dairy Queen. Kris, his mother, responded by saying that if he completed his reading time, cleaned his room, and if she could get dinner prepared she would consider it. That's all he needed! Derek raced up to his room and Kris headed to the kitchen. About a half hour later, Derek came down and asked if she was ready to go. When questioned as to whether or not he had completed his tasks, he had not; Derek broke down into a fit of rage after being told they weren't going. "You promised you were taking me to Dairy Queen!" he screamed. No amount of explaining the facts and the contingencies of the earlier discussion could calm him down. Only serving to fuel his anger more completely. Finally, before racing off to his room and slamming the door, little Derek called his mother a "scum sucking bottom dweller!" Kris, was devastated. To make matters worse, Derek returned to the kitchen a short time later in a change mood and stated: "So, are we going now?" Kris, was flabbergasted. In tears, she replied: "How could you think we are going? Don't you see what you have done to me?" Derek, with changed mood and equal bewilderment replied: "What is it? PMS?" All this, from a 6 year old!

Derek's story is a perfect example of how the exceptional child with impulse control struggles processes emotions at a much faster rate than others. Seemingly coming out of nowhere and with the intensity of a freight train, the EX child and adolescent feels the burst of emotion (anger and anxiety are the big ones) and then is unable to utilize the frontal lobe to curtail the intensity or reflect upon ways to express it. Neither, are they able to use higher level thinking skills to think of solutions to these miniscule difficulties in life. Unlike Aristotle, who commented that the mark of a civilized human being was the ability to reflect upon anger and direct it in the appropriate manner, the EX individual is a puppet to their emotions.

Making this even harder to understand for others who are friends, teachers, or family members, is the quickness with how these emotions are processed and then moved on from. While others are recovering from the emotional onslaught, the EX child moves onto the next stimulation and subsequent emotion. Their anger can turn on a dime to excitement and happiness depending upon what's going on around them.

### Notes From the Classroom: A Day in the Life of Micah

Micah, a 9th grader, arrived late to first period, bleary eyed and his hair uncombed. As is often the case, Micah had trouble sleeping the night before (and therefore trouble getting up); this always has great potential to impact his behavior the following day.

When asked if he had turned in his homework, it was as if a switch had been flipped. The slow-paced, drowsy personality suddenly became energized, unfortunately with powerful negativity: *Why are you bothering me? I did it, just left it at home on the printer. Call my mom, I don't care. I don't even want to be here.*

The explosive moment showed that this was not his first challenge of the day. A follow-up call with Micah's mom proved that it had been a tremendous struggle to get him out of bed and to school that morning.

Perhaps most disturbing to the teachers and aides in the school setting was how many impulse control disordered children responded to recent mass traumas. Starting with the Columbine shootings, these were the children who were playing with pretend guns while on the play ground the very next day. When confronted by upset adults, they showed little understanding of their bewilderment. Two boys (both diagnosed with ADHD) in a school assembly the next day, erupted into an argument as I helped them discuss their questions and concerns. At the discussion point, was what type of bombs were used and how big an explosion they would make!

So too, were many of their responses following 9/11. That very afternoon, several were out on the playground playing world war III and pretending to be crashing airplanes! No wonder others often consider the EX individual to lack

remorse and a basic understanding of emotions. While most do feel things, experience empathy and feel remorse, they just process these emotions and experiences much quicker than most. Leaving them misunderstood and rejected once again.

#### **Notes From the Classroom: *A Day in the Life of Micah***

Micah was clearly not ready to learn about similes and metaphors or dependent clauses and comma splices; the emotional needs of the moment greatly outweighed the academic. My experience has shown that if the social/emotional capacities are overly stressed, learning, of the academic kind, is unlikely to occur no matter how great the lesson. There are however opportunities for other teachable moments.

As I needed to continue the lesson for the other students in the class, I requested that Micah write in his journal. After his outburst I calmly and directly told him, "Tell me what's going on in your journal." The journal system is something established from the first day of school; it is at the core of the first lesson I teach. Micah turns to his well-worn, spiral journal immediately. He knows I will write him back at the end of class.

*Dear Mr. E,*

*I had so much trouble getting here today. My mom was pushing me & I didn't want to come without my homework. I get the book we are reading & actually really like it, just didn't get the assignment done. I feel like I'm disappointing everyone in my life. My dad comes back from a business trip on Friday and he'll be mad too. Can I stay in at lunch to do the homework?*

*Sincerely, Micah*

As Micah describes, these emotions of the moment; intense outbursts and negative responses from others often lead to the EX individual feeling misunderstood. Unjustifiably accused (since they are stopping and reflecting upon all the pieces to the problem) and a resulting sense of unresolved anger or a deep sense of shame. When asked to discuss the situation at a later, calm time, their typical response is to refuse to talk about it. Unable to process the facts in a calm way and gain a fuller appreciation of the cause and effect of social and emotional relationships only sets them up to repeat the same overly emotional process. As Abraham Lincoln stated: "Unless we understand the past, we are bound to repeat it." Failing to process in the moment or later on makes them "prisoners of the moment" to their emotions (Ratey, 1997).

#### **Recommendations For Home & School**

In order to help change this impulsive emotional process, it's important for parents and educators to remember three very basic strategies for change. First, begin with plenty of positive messages of value and self worth. Since EX students experience substantially more negative feedback than other students, they first need to feel someone is on their side emotionally and truly values their

emotions and opinions (Kirby, 1994).

Secondly, set up a structured discussion time in the home or classroom where discussion of emotional issues are reinforced and positively rewarded. In our group setting for example, we start by giving others positive points after a particular activity. Next, we ask if anyone can admit that they should lose a point for their behavior or negative emotional response. Any student, who is able to do so, loses a point but immediately earns two positive points for the group for the simple act of taking responsibility for their actions. In the home setting, always let your child know that while they might receive a negative consequence for their outbursts, this consequence will be cut in half for simply being willing to admit it and talk about it.

Finally, further reinforce your child or student if they are able to discuss the details of what happened and engage in successful problem solving. Start with what they were thinking and feeling about the problem and then help them move to look at what the other person was thinking or feeling. Then help them brainstorm about how they might have behaved differently or what they could do next time and to then make amends with the other person. On this end, emphasize that others will forgive you if you take responsibility afterwards and communicate to the other person that you understand and appreciate their perspective.

#### **Notes From the Social Circle: *Evan's Outburst and the Response***

As an example, Evan was a 10 year old who had an outburst over not being selected by John to be the goalie for the upcoming soccer game. At the start of the discussion, Evan was reinforced for later joining in the game as a forward (he had sat out earlier) and made some attempts at being a positive player. This acknowledgement allowed him the strength to admit that he had an emotional outburst (although he still felt it unfair that John had picked a girl to be goalie).

Starting with his perspective, we asked him to explain why he thought this had happened. He immediately responded that John didn't think he was any good at being goalie and purposely chose the other child. We then brainstormed other reasons he might have made his decision. Perhaps the other child raised her hand first, perhaps he didn't like how Evan was waving his hand to be selected, that perhaps John liked the girl and wanted to win her affections, or that it was just a quick decision on John's part and had nothing to do with his feelings about Evan.

John was then asked to comment on why he picked the other player. To everyone's delight and laughter, John explained that his mother had told him to always let girls go first! He was simply trying to be a gentleman. The end of the discussion focused on how Evan could have handled the situation differently by simply asking John if he could be the second goalie. Everyone then reinforced Evan's process and the group as a whole was rewarded an additional five points.

**Notes from the Classroom: Resolution with Micah**

When students are independently working, Micah raises his hand and gives me his journal. The routine with the journals established during the first week of school is that if students turn them into the mailbox (an actual mailbox I keep in the classroom), I have twenty-four hours to reply. If they are handed to me, I do my best to reply immediately.

As is often the case, Micah's handing me the journal is like a peace offering, nonverbally communicating to please accept his apology for his misbehavior and allow him to hit the re-set button. I reply quickly:

*Dear Micah,*

*Thanks for turning to the journal. I could tell you were frustrated this morning. Thanks for problem solving too; yes, let's spend 15 minutes at lunch to finish the homework & I can teach you what you missed in class today. Bring your cell phone (are you ever without it?) so we can give mom a quick call at the end of lunch to share your accomplishments today.*

*Sincerely, Mr. E*

While the emotional responsiveness of the EX child is being increasingly understood in the brain, the emphasis needs to be placed on helping the student slow down and reflect upon the situation using the three principles described. In addition to healing relationships, it is this type of thoughtful process that will allow the student to be more reflective in the future and feel a greater sense of control in the handling of their emotions and relationships.

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