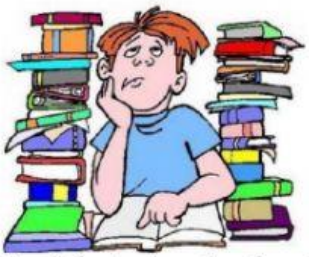
When Children Fail in School: Understanding Learned Helplessness



Read the text and write a heading:

Learned helplessness is the belief that our own behaviour does not influence what happens next; that is, behaviour does not control outcomes or results. For example, when a student believes that she is in charge of the outcome, she may think, "If I study hard for this test, I'll get a good grade." On the contrary, a learned helpless student thinks, "No matter how hard I study for this test, I'll always get a bad grade." In school, learned helplessness relates to poor grades and underachievement, and to behaviour difficulties. Students who experience repeated school failure are particularly prone to develop a learned helpless response style. Because of repeated academic failure, these students begin to doubt their own abilities, leading them to doubt that they can do anything to overcome their school difficulties. Consequently, they decrease their achievement efforts, particularly when faced with difficult materials, which leads to more school failure. This pattern of giving up when facing difficult tasks reinforces the child's belief that he or she cannot overcome his or her academic difficulties.
Learned helplessness seems to contribute to the school failure experienced by many students with a learning disability. In a never-ending cycle, children with a learning disability frequently experience school difficulties over an extended period, and across a variety of tasks, school settings, and teachers, which in turn reinforces the child's feeling of being helpless.

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Some characteristics of learned helpless children are:

1. Low motivation to learn, and diminished aspirations to succeed in school.
2. Low outcome expectations; that is, they believe that, no matter what they do in school, the outcome will always be negative (e.g. bad grades). In addition, they believe that they are powerless to prevent or overcome a negative outcome.
3. Lack of perceived control over their own behavior and the environmental events; one's own actions cannot lead to success.
4. Lack of confidence in their skills and abilities (low self-efficacy expectations). These children believe that their school difficulties are caused by their own lack of ability and low intelligence, even when they have adequate ability and normal intelligence. They are convinced that they are unable to perform the required actions to achieve a positive outcome.
5. They underestimate their performance when they do well in school, attributing success to luck or chance, e.g., "I was lucky that this test was easy."
6. They generalize from one failure situation or experience to other situations where control is possible. Because they expect failure all the time, regardless of their real skills and abilities, they underperform all the time.
7. They focus on what they cannot do, rather than focusing on their strengths and skills.
8. Because they feel incapable of implementing the necessary courses of action, they develop passivity and their school performance deteriorates.

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Learned helpless students, perceive school failure as something that they will never overcome, and academic events, positive or negative, as something out of their control. This expectation of failure and perceived lack of control is central in the development of a learned helpless style. The way in which children perceive and interpret their experiences in the classroom helps us understand why some children develop an optimistic explanatory style, and believe that they are capable of achieving in school and others develop a pessimistic explanatory style, believing that they are not capable of succeeding in school (Seligman, Reivich, Jaycox, and Gilham, 1995).

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Children with an optimistic explanatory style attribute school failure to momentary and specific circumstances; for example, "I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time." Children with a pessimistic explanatory style explain negative events as something stable (the cause of the negative event will always be present), global (the cause of the negative event affects all areas of their lives), and internal (they conclude that they are responsible for the outcome or consequence of the negative event). A typical pessimistic explanatory style is, "I always fail no matter what I do." On the contrary, when the outcome of the event is positive, a pessimistic child attributes the outcome to unstable (the cause of the event is transitory), specific (the cause of the event is situation specific), and external (other people or circumstances are responsible for the outcome) causes.

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Due to this perceived lack of control of the negative event, a learned helpless child is reluctant to seek assistance or help when he is having difficulty performing an academic task. These children are ineffective in using learning strategies, and they do not know how to engage in strategic task behavior to solve academic problems. For example, learned helpless children are unaware that if they create a plan, use a checklist, and/or make drawings, it will be easier for them to solve a multistep math word problem. With learned helpless children, success alone (e.g. solving accurately the multistep problem), is not going to ease the helpless perception or boost their self-confidence; remember that these children attribute their specific successes to luck or chance. According to Eccles, Wigfield, and Schiefele (1998), trying to persuade a learned helpless child that she can succeed, and asking her just to try hard, will be ineffective if we do not teach the child specific learning and compensatory strategies that she can apply to improve her performance when facing a difficult task. The authors state that the key in helping a learned helpless child overcome this dysfunctional explanatory pattern is to provide strategy retraining (teaching her strategies to use, and teaching explicitly when she can use those strategies), so that we give the child specific ways to remedy achievement problems; coupled with attribution retraining, or creating and maintaining a success expectation. When we teach a learned helpless child to use learning strategies, we are giving her the tools she needs to develop and maintain the perception that she has the resources to reverse failure. Ames (1990) recommends that, in combination with the learning strategies, we help the learned helpless child develop individualized short-term goals, e.g., "I will make drawings to accurately solve a two-steps math word problem." When the child knows and implements learning strategies, she will be able to experience progress toward her individualized goals.

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To accomplish this, we need to help learned helpless children recognize and take credit for the skills and abilities that they already have. In addition, we need to develop in children the belief that ability is incremental, not fixed; that is, effort increases ability and skills. Tollefson (2000) recommends that we help children see success as improvement; that is, we are successful when we acquire or refine knowledge and skills we did not have before. We need to avoid communicating children that, to succeed in school, they need to perform at a particular level, or they need to perform at the same level than other students. When we help children see success as improvement, states Tollefson, we are encouraging them to expend effort to remediate their academic difficulties. In addition, we are training them to focus on strategies and the process of learning, rather than outcomes and achievement.

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To minimize the negative impact of learned helplessness in children, we need to train them to focus on strategies and processes to reach their academic goals, reinforcing the belief that, through effort, they are in control of their own behavior, and that they are in charge of developing their own academic skills. For example, to help a child focus on the learning process, after failure, we can tell the child, "Maybe you can think of another way of doing this." This way, our feedback stays focused on the child's effort and the learning strategies he or she is using -within both the child's control and modifiable. When children themselves learn to focus on effort and strategies, they can start feeling responsible for positive outcomes, and responsible for their own successes in school and in life.

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