

## **Reactive Attachment Disorder: A Summary for Teachers**

**Jessica Murphy, MSW, LICSW**

### **What is Reactive Attachment Disorder?**

As infants we totally rely on our caretaker to feed us, change us and most of all respond to our cries, to hold us, to talk to us and to look at us and smile so we feel loved.

If we are severely neglected, food comes occasionally and randomly, not when we cry from hunger pains. Diaper rashes and urine burns cause constant pain and we give up crying (or asking for anything) because crying brought either nothing or we got yelled at or hit, squeezed, shaken or thrown. And yet somehow some of us fight to survive (some fail to thrive).

For some of us survival means believing that we can meet our own needs either directly, by stealing what we need or indirectly by tricking people into giving us what we need (also known as lying). Because we desperately need human interaction, and we're not getting love, we will evoke anger just to confirm that we exist and that we are in control. This is called Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD). Reactive, because this survival behavior is in reaction to early neglect and abuse, Attachment Disorder because of the inability to form healthy attachments to others including primary caretakers.

### **How can parents promote healing?**

As a child with RAD grows older, believing and proving to themselves that they are in control dominates their experience. Even the slightest doubt can cause them to steal, lie (trick) and purposely act to infuriate others.

If they are put into a safe situation where adults want to nurture and care for them, they just can't hand over the control. The last time they were not in control (as infants) they almost died inside and instead began to fight for survival.

Parents can try to teach the child that adults are in control and that they will take care of them. The child will resist this message and parental love with tremendous energy, conviction and stamina. *Without support from their community*, parents can become frustrated, angry, exhausted, helpless and hopeless.

Children who have RAD have antisocial behaviors like stealing, lying, and acting out. Acting out behaviors can include destruction of property, cruelty to small animals or children or just plain insubordination. Obviously, if these patterns continue into adulthood, this child's future is looking grim. Parents can try to substantially decrease these behaviors by using consequences combined with empathy. To be effective, parents must be strict. Combined with simultaneous, unwavering empathy, enforcing strict consequences is the most compassionate thing to do. After all, mowing the lawn for an entire summer is a lot less painful than the consequences the child

would face for an antisocial behavior as an adult. The empathy is crucial so as not to reinforce bad behavior by becoming angry or disapproving and thus confirming that the child has control. To others, parents may appear to be too strict, uncaring and uncommitted. During these times, parents need teachers to withhold judgment and instead listen with an empathic ear and offer support whenever possible. Parents need teachers to educate themselves about RAD before critiquing parenting techniques or offering ideas about parenting styles.

### **How can teachers promote learning?**

At school a child with RAD needs to learn that adults are in control and that adults are safe to be with. This can be an enormous undertaking and requires great patience with the student and with one's self. The student will persist in their ways and the teacher will make mistakes.

In the interest of promoting learning, teachers can make efforts to avoid increasing the students anxiety by creating an environment that is highly structured. When the student knows what is expected of them, there is a greater chance of success. (When living in a dysfunctional home, the child never knew what would happen next, when the next meal would be, when the next physical or verbal abuse would be. Even if the child was taken away from their family years ago, this free-floating anxiety makes a home in the body.)

When teachers are overly warm and friendly to a student who has RAD, the student's emotional defenses are threatened. The student will begin to feel vulnerable as they lose control over what is happening to them. Either immediately or eventually they will do something (steal, lie, act out) to again demonstrate to themselves that they are in control and therefore safe. At this point rather than focusing on learning, the student is focusing on surviving. To minimize this dynamic at school, it is best for teachers to maintain a positive business-like relationship with the student. The more neutral the teacher can remain, not reaching out to be friendly with the student and not becoming angry or disapproving of the student, the more the student can focus on the task at hand. This doesn't mean that the teacher should pay less attention to or be cool to the student. On the contrary, the teacher can support the student with frequent contact and an air of self-confidence (self-control). The feeling a teacher should convey to the RAD student is, "I am in control of my actions and I will not hurt you physically or emotionally. When you do not follow the rules I will give you a consequence to help you learn not to hurt you." This unspoken contract can be difficult for a teacher to honor if the teacher takes the student's behavior personally such as direct insults or a "bad attitude" toward the teacher.

When a child who has RAD wants something, they would prefer to take it or trick a person into giving it to them rather than to ask someone for it. When the student makes a poor choice, give them a consequence in a business-like fashion (without negativity). Deliver a consequence the first time, rather than the second or third time. Create a consequence that fits the act whenever possible. When attempting to create a consequence, the teacher can ask, "What if this student was an adult and they did this behavior?" For example, if the student destroys school property, they can do chores at school (cleaning perhaps) to 'pay back' the school. This takes creativity and isn't always practical or possible. Teachers can think of the ideal consequence and then do whatever is closest to that ideal that is possible in the school context. When a student is insubordinate to a teacher, think of this for a moment as an employee being insubordinate to a

supervisor. What would the immediate and long-term consequences be and what can we do to form a consequence now, that would be less painful than joblessness and homelessness.

Instill in the student the understanding that their behavior is their choice. Students with RAD often blame others for their own behavior, a dangerous belief system at best. Be a mirror for the student, “that was an interesting choice,” or “so you chose not to ask for help.” Mirrors don’t pass judgment upon us they simply reflect us back to us. Reinforce this concept of choice so the student can come out of their victim role and become empowered to take responsibility for their behavior or for asking for help.

When teachers become irritated, frustrated, disapproving or angry (all human reactions of course) towards the student with RAD, the teacher confirms for the student yet again that the student is in control and that adults are not to be trusted. Sadly, the student feels that they have won and they find comfort in that, although the comfort is shallow and short-lived. Also, they may even feel understood, thinking, “See, now you know I am a bad kid, you finally understand me.” Students with RAD operate from a shame-base (feeling rotten to the core). Teachers can not convince them otherwise by being ‘nice’ to them or by trying to build their ‘self-esteem’. There really is no base of self-esteem to build on to. Parents at home with professional help are trying to help the student in this area. Trying (too directly) to help the student to increase self-esteem at school increases anxiety and decreases the student's ability to focus on school work. Praise a student only when they are showing pride in something they have done. This way you are affirming their experience for them. Otherwise, let positive outcomes be the reward.

Always require that the student maintain eye contact when you are talking to them or when they are talking to you, even during simple interactions like the student asking to go to the bathroom. Students who have RAD will often avoid eye contact unless the eye contact will serve to get them what they want. At the same time, without eye contact, chances are greater that the student will misread the teacher’s emotional cues (thinking that the teacher is angry). With eye contact, the teacher is offering contradictory evidence to the belief that the teacher is angry with the student. Also, sometimes ‘calm’ affect can be contagious and may help to reduce anxiety in the student.

If the student tells a concerning story about how their parents treat them at home, call the parents and get the full story. The student needs to fail at manipulating adults in order to learn to trust that adults are strong enough to keep them safe.

Jessica Murphy works as a Response Team Social Worker for Adoption Crossroads, a post adoption support service at Children’s Aid and Family Service in Northampton, Massachusetts (413) 584-5690. For more information contact the Adoption Crossroads in your region. The statewide number for Adoption Crossroads is 1-800-972-2734.