

Case Studies

HELP FILE

Ineducable? (9)

"My son is 9 years old. We have had a problem with him since he entered school. He is a very bright young man, however he comes across as being very stupid to the teacher. He does not like school. Reading is not his thing and writing is even worse. When he has to write a story his head is blank. Even if you give him ideas he just can't latch onto them. The trouble we are having in school is that he does not always understand instructions given and therefore, instead of working on a project he just sits there staring into space. The teachers have pegged him as a trouble maker and disruptive force in the class.

The other day for instance, he had to write a letter on his hobbies – everything was great the letter was good, his hobbies were golfing, playing computer games etc., then all of a sudden he throws this line in --- "I like to smash mirrors, smash rocks and pick my nose and eat it."

Well the teacher sent home a note that she is extremely concerned about his hobbies and that he had asked him over and over again if this was in fact his hobby and he replied "yes". he wanted to keep him in at recess the next day so that he could re-write an appropriate letter. I agreed and told him that, that would be fine.

When I confronted him about this letter, he seemed genuinely sorry – I asked him have you ever smashed a mirror? – he replied "no" , as far as picking his nose – he says he does do that. Now – I am totally at my wits end. I know him inside out and I know that he can be a wonderful, caring, loving little boy who is always eager to help me. Who if we find the right story for him will read with no problem. Who likes to work with his hands shares and has great ideas.

However, no one else sees that – they all seem to think I have a little monster on my hands and when I get these kinds of things back from school – I see a side of him that I can't believe is there. What should I do?

I think his worst problem is that he is extremely immature. He has a hard time developing relationships with people he doesn't know, as with the teacher – he is not very close to her – he sees her as someone who gets him into trouble.

After he does something like this – he feels bad however, I do not think he really understands what he has done. He does not consider consequences.

Any advice would be appreciated."

Jenny Replied

The key to getting along and achieving at school at this age is having a good relationship with your teacher and to have a sense of belonging in school, - feeling able and appreciated there. This would appear to not be happening for your son.

It appears that he is seemingly bright but has difficulty learning in the way he is being taught, and this is naturally reflected in his behaviour and unfortunately, he

has become labelled as difficult. Instead, his teachers should search for different ways for him to learn.

I am truly sorry about this. His reaction in the letter is just saying 'please help me', reinforced by him feeling genuinely sorry when talking about it with you. He doesn't know why all this is happening and he is just communicating his confusion, his unhappiness and his needs in the only way he can - through his behaviour. The more bizarre the behaviour - e.g. his letter - the greater is his cry for help. If you feel you have a rapport with his teacher and can build together to help him ... then go for it. It will require her to change her picture of himself at school. When done skilfully, communicating to a child that they are valued and capable can turn a child around - especially a child like yours - just like that (click). There will be days when he regresses .. he is immature for his age you said ... but with a plan and skills it *can* be done - he can begin to feel valued for himself.

Equally important is for him to feel he can do the work at school. As I do not know where you live I cannot advise you on other available support. It would be a good idea to have him assessed for any possible learning difficulty so that it can receive appropriate attention, - dyslexia springs to mind and is easily managed these days. From your description he has some difficulties in reading and writing and because he finds them hard he naturally dislikes doing them and is likely to misbehave.

I wonder if you might find Jeffrey Freedman and Laurie Parsons' book helpful ... *"Right brained children in a left brained world"* - it may open some doors for you. Briefly it looks at how some children learn visually (through pictures), whereas others learn verbally (through words), and how to help these children at various ages. Unfortunately, generations teachers have taught "by words" alone, but some children have great difficulty retaining the meaning of words alone and need to create pictures in their mind to conceptualise meaning.

Perhaps you may like to respond to what I have said and then we could look at options for your son. Do not give up on him ... he is obviously a dear little boy who is very confused because he cannot understand why he cannot do what others do and fit in - belong at school. I am so sorry for him ... it can be tough out there and the only way young children have to communicate their frustration is through their behaviour. It is not a conscious thing - they just feel unhappy and confused and they act-out to communicate their feelings.

Let me know if this is helpful and give me a little more background on his teacher, the educational system etc. and we can look at your options and further ways of helping him. Please try and get hold of that book ... it may help clarify his difficulty in learning. Believe in him ... keep chatting together .. acknowledge his feelings and how it can be difficult at school ... listen to him and let him talk about how he learns and what happens at school. Learning is far more complex than many people realise. At this age this sort of problem can even be something quite simple ... children are complex, fascinating but most of all they need to feel loved ... valued and able. Lets see if we can't turn things around for him at school.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Jenny Mackay