

School Struggles: Are Undiagnosed Brain Disorders the Cause?

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When your child or teen is struggling in school, it is not just a problem him or her; the entire family suffers. Children, teens, and parents dread coming home to the nightly agony of hours of homework and studying for tests. Both the parents and kids feel helpless and frustrated because nothing seems to help. A multitude of remedies may be tried, including after-school tutoring, more one-on-one help from a parent, and computer games that reinforce skills covered in class, all to no avail. ^{[[SEP]]}What do you mean you scored a 42 on that math test? You knew every concept last night and scored a 100 on a practice test!

When Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) remains undiagnosed, a child may make a high score when neurotransmitters are at the right level and score very low when they drop. Frequent grade fluctuation is very common in children with untreated ADHD. ^{[[SEP]]}A 15 on the GRE? That can't be possible! You have never made lower than an A or B in your life!

When a teen has an undiagnosed anxiety disorder such as obsessive compulsive disorder, he may check and recheck every item he answers and not have time to finish a standardized test. The resulting standardized test score is low not because the teen does not know the material, but because he is spending too much time analyzing each answer and cannot finish within the time limit. ^{[[SEP]]}A 52 on your English essay? English has always been your best subject, and you love to write. I cannot understand what is happening!

When a teen is depressed, she loses interest in everything, including her favorite class. Depression also causes difficulty in concentrating, recalling information, and organizing and completing tasks. ^{[[SEP]]}This note says you will be sent to in-school suspension for the third time this year for talking back to a teacher and starting a fight. The next offense will result in a three-month stay in alternative school! What is wrong with you? You have never been in trouble at school until this year!

Undiagnosed Oppositional Defiant Disorder is evidenced by frequent temper tantrums, excessive arguing with adults, deliberate attempts to annoy or upset adults and/or peers, and active defiance and refusal to comply with adult requests and rules. ^{[[SEP]]}Your teacher called today and said that you are having a lot of trouble concentrating in class, don't know the answer when called on in class, and seem to daydream most of the time. I am spending thousands of dollars a year for private school tuition for you to daydream! What are you thinking?

Undiagnosed ADHD/ inattentive type is evidenced by frequent daydreaming, an inability to focus and concentrate, and much trouble with organizing and finishing tasks. ^{[[SEP]]}All of these scenarios depict examples of children or teens who are struggling to achieve in school because of an undiagnosed brain disorder. If the brain is not working as it is supposed to work, there can be serious problems with schoolwork, mood, and/or behavior. When the chemicals in the brain are unbalanced, the result can be lowered or failing grades; abrupt changes in behavior; withdrawal from parents, friends, and activities; major problems focusing; and ongoing arguments with teachers and parents. The good news is that all of these disorders are TREATABLE!

While as parents we would never dream of sending our child or teen to school with a high fever or a stomach virus, we may be sending a child or teen to school every day with an undiagnosed brain disorder. Most of the problems that children and teens with an undiagnosed brain disorder have are simply not going to be overcome without an intervention of medication and/or therapy. The following signs indicate a child or teen may have need for a psychiatric evaluation:

YOUNGER CHILDREN

- *Marked decline in school performance often accompanied by grades that go up and down on the same skill
- *Poor grades despite trying very hard
- *Severe worry or anxiety as shown by regular refusal to go to school, go to sleep, or take part in regular activities that are normal for his age
- *Frequent physical complaints such as stomachache, headache, etc. when it is time to go to school or do homework

*Hyperactivity, fidgeting, and constant movement beyond regular playing

*Persistent nightmares

*Frequent, unexplainable temper tantrums

*Threatening to harm self or others

PRETEENS OR TEENS

*Marked decline in school performance

*Inability to cope with problems and daily activities

*Marked changes in sleeping or eating habits

*Extreme difficulty concentrating

*Acting out sexually

*Depression shown by sustained, prolonged negative mood and attitude, often accompanied by poor appetite, excessive sleeping, thoughts of death, or severe anger outbursts

*Severe mood swings

*Strong worries or anxieties that get in the way of daily life

*Repeated use of alcohol and/or drugs

*Threats of harm to self or others

*Self injury such as cutting; self-destructive behavior; or participating in very dangerous behaviors such as high-speed driving, racing, etc.

*Repeated threats to run away

*Aggressive or non-aggressive violation of rights of others, opposition to authority, truancy, thefts, or vandalism

*Very, very happy feelings followed abruptly by very, very sad or low moods

If you see any of these signs in your child or teen, it is very important to have your child evaluated. Behavioral health is part of most medical insurance plans, and the majority of plans cover 80% of the costs. Take advantage of the help that is available for your child or teen. Getting the proper diagnosis and treatment can have a huge, positive impact not only on the child, but also on the entire family. You can ask your pediatrician for the name of a licensed professional counselor, clinical psychologist, or psychiatrist. Treatment works!

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