

*What issues
prevent Teddy from
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can changes be
made to make him
more successful?*

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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A 'BAD KID'

RECENTLY, I OBSERVED A FOURTH-GRADE boy who seems to have been “on a roll” of difficult behavior from the day he started school. Seating myself in an inconspicuous corner of the classroom, I set up a stop-watch and proceeded to record his every move. An hour later, I had a notebook half-full, a very sore hand, and some revealing information.

When I entered the room, Teddy* was seated with his head on his arms, intently listening to the teacher read a story aloud to the class. When the story ended, the teacher told the students to get out their science notebooks. Teddy left his seat and roamed around for almost a minute, then sat down and retrieved

B Y S A N D R A D O R A N

his science *textbook* and began flipping through the pages, looking at the pictures. He remained seated for about half a minute, then wandered up to the teacher, who was reviewing vocabulary with the class from the science notebooks, and asked an irrelevant question about the textbook. She asked him to sit down, which he did for five and a half minutes, perusing his book from front to back, randomly calling out "Solar System" in the midst of the class's review of genetics.

Teddy then discovered that the cover was falling off his book, and strolled up to the teacher to announce his find. Once again, she pointed him back to his seat, where he remained for one minute. Noticing that his sneaker was falling apart, he stood up, retrieved the tape from the back of the room and began a massive repair job. That finished, he discovered an eraser lying on the floor, audibly rejoicing at his find.

Sketching a picture on its surface, he proudly marched up to the teacher, displaying his artwork. She smiled faintly, nodding once again in the direction of his desk.

Teddy obediently sat down, but then discovered that the desk beside his boasted a nice, big water bottle. He picked it up, tipped it ever so slightly and let a few drops fall onto Sonia's desk, who instantly raised her hand and called out frenetically, "Mrs. C! Mrs. C!"

Mrs. C. managed to smooth over the incident, and present the next assignment. She told the students to begin working at their desks. By this time, Teddy had found a pencil on the floor, which he karate-chopped with his head.

"Bravo," cried Ralph from the other side of the room, clapping his hands. "Do it again!"

Teddy, at a loss for another pencil, noticed two on the desk beside him, and slid them out to the gasps of Sonia, karate-chopping them with his head.

"Teddy," said Mrs. C. "Why aren't you working?"

Why, indeed? What issues prevent Teddy from learning, and how can changes be made to make him more successful? Teddy displays problems with

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both selective and sustained attention. *Selective* attention enables individuals to focus their attention on the important parts of a task. Put simply, you can't pay attention until you know *what* you need to pay attention to. Teddy missed the *salient* point of the teacher's initial instructions: "Get out your science notebooks." By getting out his science *textbook*, Teddy indicated his *desire to comply, but his inability to grasp the vital feature of the teacher's instruction.*

Thus, the lesson began with Teddy already "out of the loop." Teddy's inability to grasp the vital feature of the task was

compounded by his inability to *sustain* attention for extended periods. His maximum stay at his desk appeared to be about five minutes. Teddy could focus for just so long and then he was up and about. By returning to his seat every time he was requested to do so, Teddy indicated his desire to comply, but he was unable to sustain attention for periods exceeding five minutes.

Teddy's teacher can help him by addressing both his *selective* and *sustained* attentional needs. At the beginning of each

assignment, Teddy needs to be directed toward the task with both written and verbal instructions. A simple piece of paper, placed on his desk, with the words "Science Notebook" might have prevented Teddy from missing the entire focus of the lesson.

Breaking the task down into parts, such as placing a cardboard strip on Teddy's desk for each word being reviewed, could have helped Teddy sustain attention in smaller bits. Positive reinforcement for each five-minute segment of focused attention might have further motivated and helped restore his self-image.

Is Teddy a bad kid? I don't think so. Just one badly in need of help. ☞

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* Names in this article have been changed.

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