

## **Classroom Strategies that Enhance Learning for Children with Smith-Magenis Syndrome**

*By Barbara Haas-Givler, Med, BCBA, and Brenda Finucane, MS, LGC*

### **The Quest for Adult Attention**

Children with SMS are very much adult-oriented, with a sometimes-insatiable need for individual attention. This is a key personality feature of children with SMS and one that has important implications both at home and in the classroom. For the child with SMS, positive attention is clearly preferable, but in a pinch, negative attention may serve equally well in his quest for one-on-one adult interaction. He may seek to monopolize a teacher's time during an activity, by verbally interrupting, asking questions, or trying to attract exclusive eye contact with the teacher. Showering the child with positive attention does not seem to satisfy this drive and may even fuel it further. Eventually, a teacher may try to withhold attention so that he can focus on the lesson and pay more time to the rest of the class. This often prompts attempts at getting attention through verbal outbursts, tantrums, aggression toward peers, destruction of property, etc. How then can a teacher deal with this situation, when positive attention often encourages the child to seek more, and refusal to give attention generates negative behaviors that ultimately result in attention anyway? There are no easy answers, but the following insights may be helpful.

### **A Calm, Consistent Classroom**

In our experience, children with SMS are very sensitive to the emotions of others. It is crucial that the teacher try to maintain a non-emotional tone with the child in order to neutralize the child's perceived 'reward' for attention-seeking behaviors. This does not mean that a teacher needs to become cold and robotic in the classroom; in fact, children with SMS are often very responsive to affection, praise, and other positive emotions on the part of the teacher. In moderation, a teacher's positive emotional response can strongly motivate a child to do well, and many children with SMS are exceptionally eager to please. They are also easily excitable, and exaggerated positive expressions on the teacher's part may make the child overly excited. Likewise, positive reinforcement can be overdone, as in the case of a teacher who enthusiastically praises every effort, no matter how small, so that it loses its impact and the child seeks ways to elicit a more dramatic, or at least different, response from the teacher. Teachers should try to ensure that a positive emotional response is well earned and delivered in a calm, loving way.

It is equally important for a classroom teacher to keep negative emotions under control. A teacher who becomes visibly exasperated or angry lets the child know immediately that he/she has found a surefire way to make the teacher lose control. Likewise, a teacher who frequently uses negative verbal prompts, [e.g., "Annie, don't do that", "David, pay attention", "Look at me, Mary"], may unwittingly be satisfying the child's drive for attention. This is not only exhausting for the teacher, but may in the long run, also serve to reinforce the child's attention-seeking behaviors.

We have found that a calm, emotionally neutral classroom atmosphere works best for children with SMS. For example, if a child will not stay in her seat during a lesson and constantly jumps up to verbally interrupt or attract the teacher's eye contact, the teacher might try to continue talking to the class, without reprimanding the SMS child, while physically redirecting her back to her seat. In this way, the class continues on without interruption, and the child with SMS is returned to her seat (over and over again during the class period!) without giving the child the sense that she has won a battle with the teacher. This does not always work of course, since there are times when a child's full-blown tantrum or

aggression necessitates intervention by the teacher (see Behavioral Interventions, below). Whenever possible though, negative behavior should be ignored and redirected, without even so much as a verbal reminder. Obviously, it takes a tremendous amount of self-control on the part of the teacher to continue calmly on in the face of such disruptions in the classroom. However, if a calm tone is consistently set early on, the reward may be fewer outbursts over time, since the child with SMS may realize that he cannot get the teacher to become upset.

### **A Small Class Size**

Rather than working together with their classmates, many children with SMS seem to be in competition with them, seeing them as obstacles to gaining teacher attention. We have found that ideally, children with SMS seem to do best when there are no more than five to seven other children in a classroom, with one teacher and one teacher's aide. With a class size above this ratio, the competition for teacher attention becomes greater, and the possibility of behavioral problems increases. Many children with SMS are also inherently distractible and tend to do better in smaller, calmer, and more focused classroom settings.

### **Reinforcers and Motivators**

Parents and teachers frequently remark that children with SMS seem to have an uncanny ability to size up a person's weak points and then to pull a specific behavior out of their bag of tricks just for that individual. Our experience confirms this knack for 'personalized button pushing': a child with SMS may frequently show a particular behavior in one class, but then use a different behavior which drives another teacher crazy in a different class. This clearly implies that children with SMS have some degree of control over their behaviors, but it is important to recognize that many of the negative behaviors seen in SMS have their origins in internally driven impulses. The manipulation of these behaviors by the child may reflect their degree of motivation in suppressing these involuntary impulses in the presence of one person versus another, or in the face of a specific reinforcer (reward). For example, a child who is working toward getting a sticker at the end of a classroom activity may be highly motivated to keep her outbursts under control during that period. It is not unusual, however, that once the sticker is gotten, the child is no longer motivated to use such energy to keep her impulses under control, and a full blown tantrum is the result.

Teachers need to be very creative to keep the child with SMS motivated enough to want to control his or her behavior. One strategy is to use reinforcers (stickers, individual teacher time, free play) during activities when the child is likely to get out of control. Alternate these activities with ones that the child typically likes and that do not usually require reinforcers. Reward the child with his sticker at the time of transition from one activity to the next. (Transition times are often difficult for kids with SMS and the reinforcer may serve as a distraction). Keep food rewards to a minimum - these may cause a child to view food as a desired goal under all circumstances, thus leading to overeating and food-related tantrums.

### **Visual reminders**

We have noted, and Dr. Elisabeth Dykens at Yale has confirmed, that children with SMS seem to have difficulties in processing information that is given in a sequential or step-wise fashion. For example, they may have difficulty if a teacher requests that a child empty the trash, bring the empty trash can back to the front of the room, and then go wash his hands. The child may not be able to complete all three steps of this task because of difficulties with the way his brain processes sequential information. Counting and

other mathematical tasks also involve sequential processing, and these areas may pose particular difficulties for kids with SMS.

One way to work around this problem is to use pictures or charts whenever possible to help the child visualize the different steps involved in a task or a math problem. Children with SMS tend to be visual learners, and they often need to refer to pictures for guidance in learning a new task. They can often learn to refer to the pictures independently, or with only minimal input from the teacher. Groups of pictures can be used to illustrate such things as: multi-step tasks (setting the table); the schedule of classroom activities (circle time, followed by free play, followed by snack, etc.); and counting and other math tasks. They also reinforce the sense of routine in the classroom, so that the child's day is clearly spelled out in pictures. We have observed that children with SMS have a strong need for consistency in their daily routine.

Children with SMS often look for affirmation that they have completed a task correctly, even when they probably know that they have done so. For example, the child who is asked to empty the trash may do so, all the while looking at the teacher for positive reinforcement. He may then stop and question the teacher about the next step, even though he already knows the answer. "What's next?" says the child, looking for affirmation that the task is being done correctly. If the teacher says, "You know what's next. What is it?", often the child will respond correctly and go on to the second step of the task. It appears then, that in addition to real, brain-based sequential processing problems, many young children with SMS require prompting before they will complete a series of even simple tasks. This need for positive approval throughout the day can result in a teacher spending a large amount of time confirming tasks, which the SMS child may be able to do independently. Posting pictures on the wall of the different steps involved in a task provides the child with visual reminders of what is expected. Then, when the child looks to the teacher for affirmation about a job done or the next step in the task, the teacher can simply point to the chart or tell the child to look at it. In this way, the child does not gain the teacher's full attention, and he or she may eventually learn to self-direct. This is also less distracting to the other students in the class since it does not involve a verbal exchange with the teacher.

### **Behavioral interventions**

A child with SMS can often have behavioral outbursts that disrupt his learning and that of others in the classroom. Some tantrums are inevitable, and the child may be unable to regain control over these impulses. It is clear that the child is genuinely upset at being out of control, and teachers should try to view the situation with a sympathetic attitude. It is important to establish consistent strategies which can help the child with SMS get through these difficult periods as quickly as possible. First, parents and teachers working closely with children with SMS will often get to know the types of situations likely to provoke a behavioral outburst. Some typically difficult times include: transitions from one activity to another, particularly if the SMS child is enjoying the activity that is ending; unexpected changes in the school routine, such as a substitute teacher, a school assembly that the child did not know about, etc.; and emotional upset (or excitement) in the teacher or classmates. There are usually subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) clues that a tantrum is about to begin, and teachers should intervene as soon as possible before the situation escalates. Taking the child aside and talking in a quiet, emotionally neutral tone often helps to defuse the situation. Sometimes, telling a favorite story in a very quiet voice will keep the tantrum from developing, particularly if the child has to calm down to hear what the teacher is saying. These interventions should last only long enough to distract the child, who might then be willing to continue on with an activity.

At times, nothing works to keep a tantrum from 'taking off', and once it is in full-blown splendor, there is little anyone can do except to let it run its course. We have found it best to physically remove the child from the classroom during these episodes, so that he gets the least attention possible and can calm himself. Allowing the tantrum to play itself out in the classroom, even in a time-out corner, may prolong the episode because of the excessive amount of teacher and classmate attention it inevitably engenders. If possible, someone other than the teacher should take the child to a separate, uninteresting room for time-out. Many children with SMS are anxious not to miss any activities with their beloved teacher, and may work extra hard at bringing the tantrum to an end.

### **Tough Love**

Children with SMS can present major challenges in the classroom; yet for teachers who have faced them, the rewards of teaching kids with SMS can far outweigh the challenges. Teachers at our center often count SMS kids among the most loved and memorable (positively!) children they have ever taught. Many have said that if they weren't so lovable, one would never survive the less appealing aspects of SMS. To borrow a phrase from the Peace Corps, teaching a child with SMS can be "the toughest job you'll ever love."