
Encouraging Students to Seek Academic Help: The Role of the Educational Therapist

Richard Newman, PhD

INTRODUCTION

Asking questions about material one does not understand is critical to learning. When students work independently, monitor their performance, and recognize the difficulties they cannot overcome on their own, then requesting help can be an adaptive learning strategy. Unfortunately, students may not take the initiative to get help with schoolwork because they are afraid that classmates will think they are incompetent. On the other hand, some students may seek help without attempting to work on their own because they are more interested in getting answers than in understanding the assignment.

Help seeking traditionally has been seen as an indicator of overdependence, but current research emphasizes its importance as a learning strategy. Self-regulated learners have a tool kit of strategies for dealing with academic challenges and are motivated to use the right strategies at the right times. One such strategy is *adaptive help seeking* (Newman, 2008).

Adaptive help seekers have particular cognitive competencies, such as knowing when help is needed, knowing that others can help, and knowing how to ask appropriate questions. They show social competencies, such as knowing who is the best person to approach for help and knowing how to ask for help in socially appropriate ways. They also have motivational resources, such as a desire to learn, a tolerance for task difficulty, a willingness to admit they need help, and a sense of control over their academic outcomes (Karabenick & Newman, 2006).

This article will discuss ways in which educational therapists (ETs) can help children develop these competencies and motivational resources. It is organized around three personal needs that underlie self-regulated learning: *involvement*, *autonomy*, and *competence* (Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

Children need to feel that others care about their well-being, that they are in charge of their own actions, and that they are competent. Through involvement with others, students experience a sense of relatedness. A sense of autonomy may be gained with encouragement of independence, and a sense of competence may come from understanding that academic success depends on effort. By providing involvement and support for autonomy and competence, educational therapists, parents, and teachers can foster adaptive help seeking.

THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATIONAL THERAPIST

Providing Involvement

When adults provide nurturance and share their time and energy, children tend to be attentive, self-expressive, interested in learning, and willing to make an effort. Involvement by adults is important in developing adaptive help seeking because of two mediating processes: adult-child intersubjectivity and students' personal beliefs.

Intersubjectivity. When ETs are attuned in purpose, focus, and affect, they are best able to understand their students' perspective and thinking about particular academic tasks, and, based on this understanding, appropriately guide students' learning. Attunement mitigates the power differential typical of student-teacher relations. ETs who are seen as friendly and caring show *democratic interaction styles*, with lines of communication open to students (Wentzel, 1997). They listen; ask questions to find out if students need help with difficult material; and give help in a non-threatening way. Students then perceive the therapist as a trustworthy helper. For students already disengaged at school, therapeutic involvement is especially important. Low achievers, whose self-esteem and perceptions of their own ability are low, often are reluctant to seek academic help in class. However, this reluctance can be reduced in a supportive, therapeutic context in which adults attend to students' academic and social and emotional needs (Newman, 2002).

Personal beliefs about help seeking. Classroom teachers' involvement affects students' beliefs about the benefits and costs of seeking help, and these beliefs affect students' help-seeking behavior.

Throughout the elementary school and middle school years, perceptions of mutual liking and friendship with a teacher are important considerations in classroom help seeking. Kindergartners and first graders who approach their teachers for assistance generally do so because of the global affective traits of their teachers, such as niceness and kindness. As children age, they become aware of other ways adults can meet their needs. They judge teachers as helpful when teachers are aware of their problems and give them advice, time, energy, and encouragement to ask questions in class (Newman & Schwager, 1993).

However, students also have negative views of teachers with regard to help seeking. As early as second grade, students fear negative responses, for example, "... she might think I'm dumb," if they ask for help (Newman & Goldin, 1990). Perceived costs to self-esteem are heightened when students have teachers who are unwilling to help, for example, "If you had paid attention, you wouldn't need to ask that question." Because of their need for peer approval and the need to protect their self-worth, older students are especially afraid to "look dumb" in class.

Children integrate or weigh the perceived benefits and costs of help seeking, for example, "asking questions helps you learn" compared with "it's embarrassing" (Newman, 2002). This integration process becomes increasingly complex over the

school years. In elementary school, students decide whether to seek help depending on the degree to which they expect benefits. In middle school, students' decisions are based on perceived benefits *and* costs. As fears about costs compete with beliefs about benefits, students often struggle in deciding what to do when they experience difficulty. These decisions are much easier in an educational therapy setting, where the adult-student relationships are close and supportive, minimizing embarrassment.

SUPPORT FOR AUTONOMY: LEARNING AS OPPOSED TO PERFORMANCE

Self-regulated learners usually feel autonomous (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This does not mean they are self-sufficient and isolated from others; it means they feel comfortable asking for help when necessary. ETs can support autonomy and adaptive help seeking in non-self-regulated learners by emphasizing particular achievement-related goals.

Teachers establish different kinds of goals in the classroom (Ames, 1992). One kind of goal focuses on the importance of autonomy and long-term mastery and the intrinsic value of learning. By using criterion-referenced grading and collaborative activities, teachers establish *contextual learning goals*. Students truly interested in understanding ask their teachers for task-related information that helps resolve difficulties. Or they may choose not to seek help because they like challenges and want to persevere on their own.

On the other hand, *contextual performance goals* focus on the importance of good grades and looking smart. Teachers establish this kind of goal by using norm-referenced grading and competitive activities. To mask low ability, students often avoid asking for help, but when they do make requests, they usually exhibit non-adaptive patterns of questioning, such as asking for a correct answer immediately, without even attempting the task.

Teachers must adjust to different personal goals that children bring to the classroom. Some students are motivated by *personal learning goals*. They request hints, rather than direct answers, and feedback about whether their work is correct in order to “debug” errors and get it right on their own. Other students, who have *personal performance goals*, are not especially interested in this sort of information.

Educational therapists, like teachers in the classroom, can establish goals in the therapy session. They also can accommodate individual differences in children's personal goals. When *both* contextual and personal goals emphasize learning, students are likely to seek help adaptively, whereas when both kinds of goals emphasize performance, students may be reluctant to seek help. Importantly, when children who are concerned about grades and looking smart work with an ET who emphasizes learning goals, they often overcome tendencies to avoid help. By being attuned and responsive to children's personal goals, therapists have a powerful way of helping students who might give up in the classroom.

SUPPORT FOR COMPETENCE: TEACHING STRATEGIES

As teachers establish certain patterns of discourse in the classroom, students learn the value, usefulness, and skills of questioning. Questions and probes used by teachers to diagnose misconceptions will help students learn to ask intelligent questions, both of themselves and of others. The quality of teacher feedback motivates children to know when they need help. Providing children with assistance only when needed helps them distinguish between adaptive and excessive help seeking. Encouraging students to use help strategically, for example, by revisiting incorrect problems and trying to solve them alone, teaches them to monitor their work to determine their need for more assistance (Webb, Ing, Kersting, & Nemer, 2006).

The frequency with which teachers call on students, the amount of time they wait for a response, and the amount and kind of praise they give vary from student to student. Low achievers often learn not to volunteer answers or ask questions to avoid negative feedback and embarrassment (Eccles & Wigfield, 1985). Classroom teachers who present facts without discussion, and expect students simply to learn by rote, support students' non-adaptive, dependency-oriented help seeking.

How can ETs help children be, and feel, competent with regard to adaptive help seeking? By responding to requests for help with hints and with instruction, they offer children the opportunity to master difficult tasks while learning the value of questioning in solving problems. When students learn that dilemmas and uncertainty can be tolerated, shared, and transformed into intellectual challenges, they discover the notion that some problems cannot be solved independently. Additionally, ETs who show that students deserve—and can expect—answers to questions help children develop a sense of empowerment.

CONCLUSION

Educational therapists have unique opportunities to help students develop adaptive patterns of help seeking. A critical part of the learning process is dealing with adversity. Therefore, it is important that students learn how to take the appropriate initiative in getting help. This article has focused on one way that self-regulated learners can stay engaged in the face of difficulty and potential failure.

Educational therapists can encourage adaptive help seeking by providing students with involvement, and support for autonomy and competence. First, personal involvement with children influences their beliefs about the costs and benefits of asking their classroom teacher for help. Educational therapists can buffer children from factors, such as embarrassment, that inhibit help seeking. Second, adaptive help seeking is contingent on the student's sense of autonomy. When ETs stress the intrinsic value of learning rather than of getting good grades, students begin to ask task-related questions. The establishment of learning goals encourages students to attempt

problems on their own rather than simply ask for answers. Third, adaptive help seeking is contingent on the student's sense of competence. ETs can provide valuable opportunities for students to internalize patterns of discourse that foster self-monitoring and self-questioning and that are related to adaptive help seeking.

Finally, besides directly benefiting the student, adaptive help seeking facilitates the work of the ET. *Student help seeking and therapist help giving* are linked in important ways. Adaptive help seeking shows that the student is interested in learning, and knowing this can support the therapist's sense of relatedness to the student. From students' questions, therapists get feedback and diagnostic information. They listen to students' questions and do not rush to give responses. They perceive errors as valuable information about students' thinking, which can help guide their instruction. Indeed, adaptive help seeking contributes to a culture of inquisitiveness and intellectual discourse that benefits students and educators alike.

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Note: For additional information about the topic, please contact the author at his website (<http://DrRSNewman.com>) or by email (DrNewman@DrRSNewman.com).

Richard Newman is a clinical psychologist with a practice in Woodland Hills, CA. One of his specialties is helping children and adolescents with academic difficulties and social and emotional problems such as teasing and bullying. Dr. Newman is Professor Emeritus in the Graduate School of Education, University of California, Riverside. He earned his PhD in Developmental and Educational Psychology at the University of Michigan and his MEd in Special Education at Boston University. He has written books and research articles on achievement, motivation, cognitive development, and how students cope. Dr. Newman is an Allied Professional of the AET.

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*Rebecca Barker also earned MEd with an emphasis
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