

# Questions and Answers

**DR. STANLEY GOLDSTEIN - AUTHOR AND PSYCHOLOGIST**

Selected questions are printed on this page. Responses should not be considered the equivalent of the in-person professional evaluation required to fully evaluate a parenting problem or child's difficulty. For this, consult your local licensed mental health professional.

**NOTE: SOME QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN EDITED FOR BREVITY AND/OR CLARITY**

\*\*\*\*I have a five year old daughter I gave to a relative to raise, thinking it would be better for her. I dropped out of school when I became pregnant. My daughter has lived with me for the past three years and behaves oddly. If you ask her to get her shoe so she can go out, she can't find it. When I help her with her homework she keeps on crying, and when through, does some of it. She can do the work so I don't know why she is crying so much. It frustrates me since I'm not abusing or hitting her and she is crying so much. How can I help her break out of whatever she is in? (from a small city in South America).

Your daughter's crying reveals that she feels depressed, which indicates her sense of the depth of her psychological difficulties, she then "giving up" and *depressing* her feelings. She acting babyish (seeking help with something she can really do; inability to do her homework which she knows) are *symptoms*, the fancy word for a sign that something is wrong. Which is that she may need help to deal with things (thoughts and feelings) going on inside of her. Also, her dependent behavior may reflect her desire to return to an earlier period of life when fewer demands for greater maturity were made of her, so to speak, to begin her life all over again but better. Your daughter may benefit from play therapy with a professional, in order to heal her difficulties. Having said this, I don't know how available child mental health treatment is in your city. Without knowing more about your daughter I can't provide other than the following general suggestions.

1. Try to keep the demands on her to a minimum. When children are troubled any additional demand, even the most reasonable one, is an unwelcome stress.
2. Emphasize that it sounds to you like there are some scary things going on inside of her and you wonder what they are. While she won't know (at her young age), this will give her information about the source of her unhappiness so that her life will make more sense to her, this reducing her distress.
3. Don't obsess about her homework (which has little real impact on a child's future), Instead, read to her as much as possible and encourage her reading. A child who loves to read, has confidence in themselves, and (someday) is interested in making money will do OK in life--remember what became of that noted college dropout, Bill Gates.

\*\*\*\*I'm writing my diploma work about the Littleton High School massacres and like to ask you for some help. Could you please send me some kind of short statement about the deed and the psychological background. Is it possible that the media, tv, and computer games have made children that brutal? (Sent from Europe)

Briefly, my sense is media/video games, etc. have little to do with the event. Children negotiating the adolescent period are expected to achieve certain milestones: to separate appropriately from their parents, to explore intimacy through dating, and to develop provisional educational and vocational

goals. Some fail because they have inadequate ego (psychological) capacities which develop early in life. These include weakness of the ability to control thinking and behavior, modulate mood, tolerate feelings, and developing a sense of who they are. Such teenagers may then experience great unhappiness, frustration, and rage which, rarely, is acted out with horrific consequences.

Seeking sociological explanations for individual behavior is rarely informative.

\*\*\*\*My 15 year old daughter has been sexually active and also had oral sex with up to 4 guys. I don't know what to do about it. She seems so nonchalant as if it's just nothing. I know it's not just nothing and can't understand why she feels like it's just another day...

I wouldn't believe her statement. When children or teens do something they're unable to explain logically they often give a semi-plausible reason like saying "it's nothing" or "I don't like the teacher" (when asked to explain failing grades). Most importantly I'd try to get to know her better: what she ultimately wants in her life (education, vocation, relationship), how she feels about these boys, how her dating relationships and friendships are, what classes she's having problems in. Being a trusted confidante makes it more likely you'll be able to learn her true feelings and situation and provide safety advice she'd follow. I don't think you'll be able to get her to abstain from sex (if that's your goal): once started it's not easy to stop. But, understandably, you'd like it to be less impulsive and more considered, part of a relationship. If she's unable to control her behavior, doing poorly in school and/or exhibiting other puzzling/troubling behavior then psychotherapy would likely be helpful in enabling your daughter to cope better with the demands of adolescence.

\*\*\*\*My son is 10 and a problem since 6 months old. He tells me he hates me and wants me to die. He tells his sister he wants to kill her. He threatens to kill himself all the time. He takes things, throws terrible temper tantrums, doesn't bring home his school work, and if his teacher sends home assignment sheets he hides them. He won't participate in sports because he says people will look at him and does anything he can to get out of gym at school. I could go on and on with what he's done but it'd take me forever. He's been on ritalin, adderall, 120mg of dexedrine a day, paxil, serezone and nothing seems to help. We are at our wits end with what to do with him. Nobody understands what we're going through. He's seen a psychologist, a psychiatrist, doctors and nobody seems to understand how serious and upsetting the situation is. Could you tell me what we need to do? I believe the problems he had when he was born are the cause. The cord was around his neck for three hours while I pushed and when he was born he was black, had to stay in a warmer for 10 hours to bring his temperature up, and developed jaundice. Please let me know what you think.

I stress my suggestions are not meant to substitute for in-person advice from a licensed mental health professional.

All children (and adults) have psychological abilities enabling them to control thinking and behavior, cope with and experience feelings, develop a sense of who they are, modulate mood, and function increasingly maturely. These develop within the first three years of life. If a child then experiences too great stress they may develop weakness in one or more of these abilities which prevent them from later behaving as successfully as their peers. This also causes symptoms (the sign that something is wrong) to develop (as difficult or oppositional behavior, suicidal and/or homicidal ideation, concentration and peer problems, and others). Such symptoms reflect the child's attempt to communicate their unhappiness to their parents since children don't usually speak of this directly (nor do many adults).

These symptoms are only rarely related to difficulties of birth though pregnancy experiences can have effects, research indicating mothers anxious during pregnancy tend to have overly active children. A child's suicidal ideation reflects their depression, sense of the depth of their difficulties, and giving up and "depressing" their feelings; statements they want to kill their parents or siblings reflects their great angry feelings. These should always be taken seriously and evaluated by a licensed mental health professional; they also indicate the depth of a child's unhappiness.

Your child's concern about others watching him on the playground, his "watchfulness," may reflect a

projection of his (accurate) feeling that there are things wrong with him and others notice this. In other words he "projects" this uncomfortable feeling onto others to get rid of it which is how the mind normally operates. His hiding school home assignments may reflect his difficulty concentrating and attempt to avoid the stress of having to do them, being unable to state this directly. These and other puzzling behaviors reflect his attempt to communicate his distress and gain help.

It's unclear whether your child is currently in psychotherapy which should also include speaking with his parent(s) a few minutes each session to gain information regarding his current functioning, and for them to gain child guidance advice and emotional support. If not he should be since such problems cannot be eliminated without aid. I recommend you seek treatment for him from a clinician who can explain them to you satisfaction and act to improve his functioning, which may take some time since they've been present for years, though initial minor improvement (as he being more relaxed or easier to communicate with) should occur more quickly. This would reduce and, hopefully, ultimately eliminate the unnecessary suffering of all.

\*\*\*\*My 9 year old has never listened no matter how hard I tried, always refusing to do chores and hating to clean or work, saying she feels she doesn't have to if she doesn't want to. She says she hates school but is an excellent student, has few friends and is picked on frequently. I read lots of parenting and psychology books so I know some of what's expected but then each child is an individual. We're in counseling and it's better but she still won't do chores. She likes to please so I know it can be done to get her to do what she should but how?

Please keep in mind my suggestions aren't meant to take the place of in-person professional advice about your daughter. A child's behavior is usually reasonable: if asked to do something and they can they will since their parents' love and concern is of overriding importance to them--they literally couldn't survive without it. If however they're distressed about something or hungry or tired or physically ill then their behavior can be difficult--just like that of adults at those times. And to insist a child behave, no matter how reasonable the parent's request, won't work since the child doesn't then have adequate control over their behavior.

As you know, children have individual personalities, some being more independent or assertive or social than others and no one is more desirable. What's important is a child have control over their thinking and behavior, be able to develop a good sense of who they are, able to tolerate feelings, and have other well-developed basic psychological abilities.

When children are distressed they rarely tell their parents directly but instead behave in a difficult and/or puzzling manner and expect them to interpret what's wrong and effect needed change. Your daughter may be quite unhappy (you describe her oppositional behavior, speaking of hating school yet being an excellent student, having few friends and being picked on frequently), possibly for a long time. So no matter how effective you and your husband become as parents this will have little effect if the major source of distress is within her.

Since you're in counseling the advice of the counselor regarding her should be sought. Your daughter may benefit from her own treatment in which she'd be seen most of the session while you and your husband are provided child guidance advice, alone, for the remaining time. I'd downplay chores and being concerned with she having a clean room: when children are distressed it's important to reduce the pressure on them as much as possible and she may experience even reasonable demands as stressful. So don't feel inadequate as a parent for being unable to get her to go along with your requests.