

REACTIVE ATTACHMENT DISORDER (RAD)



About RAD

Categorized under Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders within the DSM-5,¹ reactive attachment disorder (RAD) is characterized by behavior that is inhibited and reserved towards a parent or caregiver due to childhood trauma. If a student has been diagnosed with RAD, ensure that staff are trained or educated in trauma-informed care and interventions.

What Does It Look Like?

Environmental Experiences

- Experience with neglect and insufficient care, including comfort and affection, physical and mental play/development, or the provision of an appropriately stimulating environment
- Instability in caregiving relationships (i.e., frequent changes)
- Significant time spent in environments where caregiving is limited (e.g., orphanage)

Emotional Impact

The child's emotions are impacted by symptoms such as:

- Limited social and expressive reactions to others
- Flattened affect

Resulting Behavior

The child is frequently emotionally removed from caregivers or parents. Examples include:

- The child does not search out security or reassurance from a guardian or caregiver when upset.
- When a caregiver or parent attempts to console or soothe the child during a distressing time, the child does not respond.
- Interactions with adults (even if nonconfrontational) can result in anger, unhappiness, or anxiety.

Symptoms and Interventions

	Symptoms	Interventions
Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fails to react when others attempt to interact • Exhibits flattened affect or emotions • Struggles with interactions with peers • Exhibits unpredictable emotions such as anger, anxiety, or sadness • Experiences difficulties with unexpected changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be firm and calm • Acknowledge positive behaviors and good decisions • When possible, provide the student with advanced notice of unexpected changes and practice appropriate responses • Use social skills groups and work with an SMHP to help student gain emotional literacy, and practice and manage emotions and behaviors • Provide student with space to de-escalate or calm down without intensive adult presence
School Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggles with completion of work • Experiences changes in processing based on mood • Hesitates to ask for help • Lacks confidence in own work or ability • Becomes easily frustrated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider modification of assignments (e.g., smaller portions of work) when needed • Use checklists • Identify instructional or learning methods to which the student responds positively (e.g., using technology or frequent breaks) and embed them in daily work when possible • Find methods to communicate with student that the student prefers
Desk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appears disconnected from surroundings • Becomes withdrawn in group settings or seating arrangements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider alternative seating placement or surround student with understanding peers • Identify methods of engaging student based on interest or ability • Provide student with written schedule to maintain consistency and limit unexpected changes
Outside the Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not appear interested in interactive or social activities • Demonstrates aggression or lack of empathy towards others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate with parents or caregivers to identify patterns in behaviors or events at home that may impact the student's behavior (e.g., lack of sleep) • Consider a crisis plan for when student is demonstrating a concerning behavior (e.g., staff members who should interact with student)
Transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences difficulties moving from one task to the next • Struggles with transitioning from one teacher to the next (or with changes such as substitutes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide student with additional notice of upcoming transitions or allow extra time to finish a task • Maintain regular schedule when possible (place schedule on student's desk and notify of any changes if known) • Prepare student for changes in instruction if known ahead of time • Use social skills or individualized instruction to practice appropriate responses and facilitate understanding of changes.

Student Strengths

- Energetic
- Sensitive
- Resilient
- Bright
- Caring
- Creative
- Passionate

References

- ¹ American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5)*. Washington, DC: Author.

Resources

- **Child Mind Institute**
<http://www.childmind.org/en/health/disorder-guide/reactive-attachment-disorder>
- **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry**
http://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/docs/facts_for_families/85_reactive_attachment_disorder.pdf
- **Mayo Clinic**
<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/reactive-attachment-disorder/basics/symptoms/con-20032126>