



# Reactive Attachment Disorder (RADs)

**Symptoms**

Reactive attachment disorder can start in infancy. There's little research on signs and symptoms of reactive attachment disorder beyond early childhood, and it remains uncertain whether it occurs in children older than 5 years.

Signs and symptoms may include:

- Unexplained withdrawal, fear, sadness or irritability
- Sad and listless appearance
- Not seeking comfort or showing no response when comfort is given
- Failure to smile
- Watching others closely but not engaging in social interaction
- Failing to ask for support or assistance
- Failure to reach out when picked up
- No interest in playing peekaboo or other interactive games.<sup>1</sup>

**Instructional Strategies and Classroom Accommodations**

- Consider a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA). Understanding the purpose or function of the student's behaviors will help you respond with effective interventions. For example, a punitive approach or punishment may increase the student's sense of insecurity and distress and consequently increase the undesired behavior.
- Be predictable, consistent, and repetitive. Students with RAD are very sensitive to changes in schedules, transitions, surprises, and chaotic social situations. Being predictable and consistent will help the student to feel safe and secure, which in turn will reduce anxiety and fear.
- Model and teach appropriate social behaviors. One of the best ways to teach these students social skills is to model the behavior and then narrate for the child what you are doing and why.
- Avoid power struggles. When intervening, present yourself in a light and matter of fact style. This reduces the student's desire to control the situation. When possible use humor. If students can get an emotional response from you, they will feel as though they have hooked you into the struggle for power and they are winning.
- Address comprehension difficulties by breaking assigned reading into manageable segments. Monitor progress by periodically checking if the student is understanding the material.
- Break assignments into manageable steps to help clarify complex, multi-step directions.
- Identify a place for the student to go to regain composure during times of frustration and anxiety. Do this only if the student is capable of using this technique and there is an appropriate supervised location<sup>3</sup>

**RAD: What Is It?**

It is healthy and expected for a child to become attached to his primary caregivers, those he looks to for nurturing and soothing. Reactive attachment disorder (RAD) is a rare condition that occurs when infants and young children who are subject to extreme neglect or abuse fail to establish that expected bond. A child with RAD, which is diagnosed from 9 months to 5 years of age, rarely seeks or responds to comfort when distressed, shows limited positive affect, and has unexplained episodes of irritability, sadness or fearfulness in contact with caregivers.<sup>2</sup>

**RAD: Treatment**

Treatment for reactive attachment disorder usually involves both the child who has been diagnosed and his current caregivers. Treatment may include psychotherapy for the child, family therapy, parenting training, and special education services. Because RAD can be a painful and confusing experience for a child's caregiver, psychotherapy or counseling may be advisable for parents, too.<sup>2</sup>

1. Mayo Clinic  
 2. Children's Mind Institute  
 3. Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health