



## Difficult Personality Traits, part 5 of 5—

# The Inattentive Child

by Sandy Friesen, Managing Editor, Christian School Services

**T**iffany is such a sweet girl but so out-to-lunch." Tiffany is considered by most, including her parents, to be spacey, forgetful, unable to follow instruction, unable to stay on task, unable to concentrate, a wanderer, and unable to focus. However, she is also spontaneous, fun loving, easy-going, carefree, active, and exhibits a rich fantasy life which no one wants to discourage. But everyone is concerned that she is not really learning.

The parents have had her checked for attention disorders. The doctor thinks she may benefit from drug intervention, but is quite hesitant to utilize drugs as a main line of defense since Tiffany seems to be fairing moderately well socially and academically. The doctor suggests that everyone "work" with her, but no one really knows what that means.

The doctor listed four questions to work through that might help the parents and the teachers develop a plan.

### **1** What is the problem?

They summed up the problem with three concepts: distracted, difficulty staying on task, and failing to complete projects.

### **2** What are the goals for Tiffany?

The goals are that her attention problem be properly identified, that she learn to focus, and that she learn to self-motivate by gathering strategies that will help her stay with tough tasks.

### **3** What corrective actions haven't worked?

They have been focusing on the problem and constantly telling her to pay attention. (She does not seem to respond to auditory prompts. Neither does she respond positively to reprimands.) They've been giving a list of *do's* and *don'ts* hoping to give structure to the situation—threatening to take away time with friends or time in the class. Lastly, they have turned all requests into demands so that she will know how serious they are.



### **4** What patterns could be practiced to change Tiffany's behavior?

This was not easy to answer. Everyone had to do some research and pool their results. They made a brief summary of how to help inattentive children:

### **A** Look for the strengths.

Is the child good with projects,

crafts, art, drawing, talking, caring, writing, pets, etc.? Find her natural skills areas and begin approaching her from a common interest. For instance, if a lesson is on being a good neighbor and Tiffany is very good at caring for pets or animals, ask her to give the class some tips on how to care for a pet, how to learn about wild animals, or how to identify dangerous insects. Explain that sharing that information will help everyone in the class. Thusly, she is learning to be a good neighbor.

### **B** Look for what's causing the attention problem.

Many inattentive children do not respond positively to auditory prompts (speaking, verbal instruction, chatter). Monitor this. Many teachers need to talk less and watch and listen more. Tiffany may be "talked" into distraction, and float off into her own world to escape. Try less talk, more action.

### **C** Create a stage of emotional and behavioral interaction.

The teacher or the assistant needs to be one-on-one with Tiffany until the teacher understands Tiffany and Tiffany understands herself. For example, if the class is making a model of a home in Jesus' time and Tiffany gets distracted by building a tower with the craft sticks, have someone available to interact with her. For example:

**Teacher:** Tiffany, what are you building?

**Tiffany:** A tower.

**Teacher:** You don't want to build a house like Jesus may have lived in?

**Tiffany:** I forgot.

**Teacher:** Are you enjoying the tower?

**Tiffany:** Yes. I want to see how high I can go.

**Teacher:** Building towers is important, but I want you to help yourself learn something right now.

**Tiffany:** Learn what?

**Teacher:** How to help your brain stay on task. Build the house, and then build the tower.

**Tiffany:** Why do I have to build the house?

**Teacher:** Because I want you to train your brain to listen to your instructions. Practice telling your brain that you are going to build this house for 5 minutes. I will

time you and tell you when 5 minutes is up. Then you will have taught yourself to listen to yourself. Do you think you can do that?

**Tiffany:** Sure, I can do that.

The teacher times 5 minutes, congratulates Tiffany on her time-on-task practice, and explains that she can talk to herself and train herself to do many things. It will be necessary to repeat this kind of activity.



### **Take time to strengthen the weakness.**

For example, if Tiffany is not verbal (that is, she doesn't like expressing herself through conversation), start with small steps but bring about a verbal give-and-take. She needs to function in society—being able to give and take in a conversation will help

her function more effectively. Ask her questions and wait for her response. (Do this privately in the beginning.) Express appreciation when she has contributed.

**S**elf-monitoring is vital for inattentive children to train themselves to focus. They are children and need training, guidance, modeling, and mentoring in how to stay on task. Telling them to "just do it" doesn't give them any practice in focusing.

Ask the Holy Spirit to give you guidance and wisdom as you work with inattentive children. When we all work together to build God's kingdom, we can appreciate the fruit of our labor, that fruit being the manifestation of Christ in our lives.

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### **Questions For Further Study—**

1. Define the problem of the inattentive child.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. List some steps you can take to change the behavior of the inattentive child.