

Teaching Students with Emotional Disturbances: 8 Tips for Teachers

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Do you have a **student with an emotional disturbance in your class** this year? Or perhaps you have a student whose behavior or demeanor makes you wonder if an emotional disturbance is going undiagnosed? If so, please read on.

We know that emotional disturbance can be a sensitive subject. Emotional problems are painful to all concerned. Still, you can make a powerful difference in this student's life, especially armed with insight, instructional strategies that work, and ready links to the experts that this blog will give you.



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Quick Facts First

There's a lot to know (and un-know) about emotional disturbances, so we thought we'd start with a few, grounding facts.

Emotional disturbance is an **umbrella term** that's used under IDEA to describe a wide range of different disorders and conditions. Anxiety disorders, conduct disorders, eating disorders, mood disorders, psychiatric disorders... all are considered emotional disturbances. Yet each varies from the other in important ways.

Emotional disturbances carry with them a **stigma**, despite being surprisingly common in both children and adults. (1) Most of us know someone who's depressed, lives with chronic anxiety, experiences inexplicable panic attacks, or compulsively washes his or her hands or must do things in a particular order. Some of us are those people.

A wide range of **help** is available for children with mental health issues, both through the public schools and from private sources, through medication and through therapy. It's crucial to connect children with that help and to confront the stigma and fear that are often associated with emotional and behavior difficulties.

Teachers are often among the **first to suspect** that a student may have an undiagnosed emotional disturbance. (2) They may notice a student's ongoing problems with interpersonal relationships, for example, or signs of unreasonable anger, an eating disorder, or self-injurious behavior. It's also not uncommon for teachers to refer such students for evaluation, to see that they are connected with the systems of supports and services that can be genuinely helpful, even life-changing.

The nation's special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), provides a **definition** of "**emotional disturbance**" that guides how schools identify (and help) students with emotional disorders. In 2011, more than 371,000 students (ages 6 to 21) received special education and related services in our public schools under the category of "emotional disturbance." (3)

Emotional disturbances can affect many different aspects central to **student learning**, including (but not limited to): concentration, stamina, handling time pressures and multiple tasks, interacting with others, responding to feedback, responding to change, and remaining calm under stress. (4) Many of the medications prescribed to address the disturbance also have side effects that can impact student learning.

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Tips for Teachers

Given how common mental health disorders actually are, it's likely that you may have a student or two with an emotional disturbance in your classroom. How do you best help them, support their learning, and encourage their well-being? Consider these tips and strategies, and consult with the experts as you need to, including those in your school, district, and community.

1 | Learn more about the student's *specific* mental health disturbance. A mood disorder such as depression will affect a student's demeanor, thinking, learning, and behavior differently than an eating disorder like anorexia or bulimia. Knowing how the particular emotional disturbance manifests itself and is managed can help you support the student's education in individualized, informed, and effective ways. Consult the organizations we've listed in our [Emotional Disturbance fact sheet](#) for expert guidance about specific emotional disturbances.

2 | Learn more about the student's strengths, too. The student brings much more than an emotional disturbance to class. What about his or her strengths, skills, talents, and personal interests? All of these are tools in your hands as you adapt instruction, give out assignments, ask the student to demonstrate learning, and create opportunities for success.

3 | Remember, they're kids first. By and large, students with emotional disturbances aren't scary, dangerous, or time bombs waiting to go off. They are themselves, in need of your skill and support, and quite capable of learning. Do not permit bullying, teasing, demeaning, or exclusion of the student by other students—or by the system.

4 | Support the student's inclusion. Emotional disturbances, by their very nature, can make it difficult for people to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships. You can support the student with an emotional disturbance in subtle but meaningful ways, especially during group work, cooperative learning activities, peer interactions, and team projects. There may also be times to let the student work alone, take a break, or have a hall pass for some quiet time apart.

5 | Set clear behavioral rules and expectations for the entire class. Students with emotional disturbances are frequently the targets (rather than the initiators) of other students' misbehaviors. Having a stated, explicit classroom management plan provides a solid structure by which both teacher and students can address inappropriate behavior, understand consequences, and develop a shared approach to behavior in class and toward one another. This [IRIS training module](#) may help you set up such a plan.

6 | Provide accommodations. The student's individualized education program (IEP) will spell out what accommodations the student is to receive in class and during testing. If you're not part of the team that develops the student's IEP, ask for a copy of this important document. Also check with your school district for guidance on local policy and appropriate classroom accommodations for students with emotional disorders.

Although accommodations will vary depending on the nature of the student's emotional disturbance, often the appropriate accommodations will address:

- side effects of medication

- behavioral unpredictability
- impairments in concentration and memory

7 | Join the student's IEP team and help shape his or her special education program. As a team member, you can make sure the IEP includes accommodations and classroom adaptations appropriate to the student's needs and success in your class. You can also advocate for program modifications and supports for *yourself*, to help you support this student in class.

8 | Communicate with the student's parents. Parents are a great source of information about their own children. As members of the IEP team they are likely to have a multitude of suggestions for what would benefit their child with an emotional disturbance in school. They can also keep you informed as to events and developments in the child's life, new medications or treatments, and how these might affect the student in school.

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In Closing

Emotional disturbance in children is very disturbing, it's true. But it's not uncommon, any more than it's unusual in adults. As a teacher, there is much you can do to address the special needs associated with students' emotional or behavior difficulties, provide the support they need, dispel the stigma associated with mental health problems, and stand up as your students' advocate for learning and success. We applaud all your efforts!

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References

Footnote 1 | The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that just over 20% (or 1 in 5) children, either currently or at some point during their life, have had a seriously debilitating mental disorder. (Source: NIMH. (n.d.). *Any disorder among children*. Online at: http://www.nimh.nih.gov/statistics/1ANYDIS_CHILD.shtml)

Further, about 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. (approximately 57.7 million) experience a mental health disorder in any given year. (Source: NIMH. (n.d.). *Any disorder among adults*. Online at: http://www.nimh.nih.gov/statistics/1ANYDIS_ADULT.shtml)

Footnote 2 | Quinn, M.M., Osher, D., Warger, C., Hanley, T., Bader, B.D., Tate, R., & Hoffman, C. (2000). *Educational strategies for children with emotional and behavior problems*. Washington, DC: Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice. Online at: http://cecp.air.org/aft_nea.pdf

Footnote 3 | Data Accountability Center. (2012). *Number of students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, by disability category and state: Fall 2011* [Table B1-3]. Online at: <http://www.ideadata.org/TABLES35TH/B1-3.xls>

Footnote 4 | Souma, A., Rickerson, N., & Burgstahler, S. (2012). *Academic accommodations for students with psychiatric disabilities*. Seattle, WA: DO-IT. Online at: <http://www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/PDF/psych.pdf>

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