

1

What Is Emotional Disturbance?

When students with behavior problems formally enter the special education system, they generally are labeled with one of several specific terms. The federal government refers to them as “students with emotional disturbance.” This label entitles students to special education services, and the number of students identified has increased by almost 20 percent in recent years (U.S. Department of Education, 2000, 2001, 2002). States use various terms (e.g., students with emotional and behavioral disorders, students with behavior disorders). Although the states refer to this category in many ways, most use federal guidelines for **emotional disturbance** to formally define and identify it (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 1997):

The term means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree, which adversely affects educational performance:

- An inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;
- An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers;
- Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances;

8 Teaching Students With Emotional Disturbance

- A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or
- A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

The term includes children who are schizophrenic. The term does not include children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they are emotionally disturbed.

Perhaps more than for any other category of special education, emotional disturbance has a definition that leaves much room for subjectivity and confusion. For example, there are no hard-and-fast rules or simple tests for deciding when problem behaviors constitute emotional disturbance. Consider the case of Susan, a fifteen-year-old who seems unhappy most of the time at school. Her classmates say she's in a "rotten mood" and avoid her. How do we judge the extent to which Susan's unhappiness is "general" and "pervasive" or normal? And what about Luis, a third-grader who does not get along well with his classmates or his teachers? Is he showing "an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships," or is he within the range of so-called normal behavior?

There is much debate over the standards that are used to decide whether students are experiencing emotional disturbance. That debate focuses on the difficulty of measuring characteristics, moods, and abstractions (e.g., unhappiness) as well as on the definition's lack of specific behaviors that adversely affect educational performance. The debate is heightened by difficulties inherent in explaining inabilities to learn and build or maintain interpersonal relationships. Further, it is difficult to determine whether a student's behavior is caused by emotional disturbance or some other disability.

Students who exhibit severely aggressive behavior or who are extremely withdrawn are usually easy to identify, but most students who are classified with emotional disturbance do not display dramatic indicators. Sometimes, they are vulnerable to a particular teacher's tolerance for their behavior or a teacher's ability to redirect the behavior. Sometimes, students act "belligerent" or "uncooperative" because they simply do not understand English well enough to respond appropriately even

though they may understand enough to get by in nonacademic activities and settings. In essence, to be labeled with emotional disturbance, a student must do something that bothers someone else (usually a parent or a teacher), then must be identified as “emotionally disturbed” (or, an equivalent term) by a sanctioned labeler (a physician, psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, judge, or the police). These people try to be objective, but they differ in their perceptions of the seriousness and appropriateness of various behaviors; in their abilities to understand students of different cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds; and in their views of how disruptive behaviors should be treated.

WHAT YOU MAY SEE IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Students demonstrate many kinds of behavior problems. The magnitude of these behaviors also varies. We skimmed the professional literature to identify terms associated with behavior problems in school. They are listed in *Table 1.1*. Some of these terms are used to describe behaviors associated with learning disabilities, mental retardation, and other disabilities. Most of the terms are negative. If some of these terms come to mind when you think about a student in your classroom, you may want to take a closer look at that student’s characteristics to decide if a formal educational assessment is needed. This assessment can determine if emotional disturbance is part of the problem and special education services are warranted. Your first step in helping these students is documenting the nature and extent of their behavior problems. Look for evidence of the following cognitive, academic, physical, behavioral, and communication characteristics.

Cognitive Characteristics

Many cognitive deficiencies are attributed to students with emotional disturbance. These students are said to have poor

10 Teaching Students With Emotional Disturbance

Table 1.1 Terms Used in the Professional Literature to Describe Behavior Problems

aggressive	immature
aloof	impulsive
annoying	inattentive
anxious	irritable
attention seeking	jealous
avoidant	manic
compulsive	negative
daydreams	obsessive
depressed	passive
delinquent	preoccupied
destructive	restless
disruptive	rowdy
distractible	schizoid
disturbing	self-conscious
erratic	tense
frustrated	truant
short attention span	unmotivated
hostile	unsocialized
hyperactive	withdrawn

memory and short attention spans and to be preoccupied, overly active, and anxious, among other things. In general, students with emotional disturbance score slightly below average on intelligence tests, although the scores of individual students cover the entire range. There is no single cognitive characteristic that is a sure sign of emotional disturbance. Most professionals agree that absence of choice is an important consideration. For example, students with emotional disturbance may want to pay attention at school but may be unable to control their behavior to the degree necessary to stay focused.

Academic Characteristics

Most students with emotional disturbance do not do as well academically as we would expect based on their scores on

intelligence tests. Students with emotional disturbance exhibit characteristics that *adversely affect educational performance*. This means they perform poorly on measures of school achievement. Students with learning disabilities also perform poorly in at least one area of school achievement. Sometimes, when students exhibit a significant disparity between the level at which they perform on intelligence tests and the level at which they perform on achievement tests, teachers question whether emotional disturbance or learning disabilities is the appropriate category under which to provide special education services.

Generally speaking, emotional problems can lead to academic problems, and academic problems can lead to emotional problems. When students are suffering emotionally, they can become very preoccupied and simply do not attend well to academics. Students who demonstrate behavior and emotional problems may be subjected to disciplinary actions (suspension and expulsion) that in turn limit their time in school and exposure to academics. And, when students do not perform well academically, their perceptions of their own self-worth suffer. They can become withdrawn or aggressive. Or a student's noncompliance may be labeled as "isolation" or "aggression" by a teacher who fails to understand that the behavior might be due to other factors, such as the student not being able to understand English as well as his or her classmates. Students who receive low grades may give up and begin acting out. Of course, other factors (including life stressors like parental divorce, a family move, loss of a parent or sibling) can lead students to experience both academic and emotional problems. In general, any signs of underachievement should be taken seriously in deciding whether behavior problems require further evaluation.

Physical Characteristics

Most students with emotional disturbance are physically like other students. The exceptions are those with psychosomatic complaints (in which the physical illness actually is brought on by or associated with the individual's emotional state). Students who have serious physical problems can develop behavior disorders, especially when a physical

12 Teaching Students With Emotional Disturbance

disorder leads others to act negatively toward a student, and the student develops an opinion of low self-worth. Physical complaints (e.g., stomachaches, headaches), absenteeism, truancy, and school phobia (i.e., aversion to going to school) often are characteristics you will observe in students experiencing emotional disturbance.

Behavioral Characteristics

Behavior is the primary area in which students with emotional disturbance are said to differ from others. The behavioral characteristics of emotional disturbance include an inability to learn, an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships, inappropriate types of behavior or feelings, a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression, and a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears. Many inappropriate types of behavior or feelings are said to be characteristic of emotional disturbance. In addition to the terms listed in *Table 1.1*, for example, students with emotional disturbance are said to be sluggish, fixated, verbally abusive, too orderly, too conforming, disorderly, self-injurious, isolated, irresponsible, disobedient, shy, secretive, bossy, dependent, psychotic, and noncompliant.

Some professionals have tried to organize the long list of behaviors said to characterize emotional disturbance by developing alternative classification systems (subtypes). For example, one system describes conduct disorders, personality disorders, mood disorders, learning problems, neuroses, and psychoses. Another divides students with emotional disturbance into those with emotional problems (those who internalize or keep problems to themselves and blame themselves for their difficulties) and those with social problems (those who externalize or take out their problems on others and on society). There is no accepted, right way to group these behaviors. We prefer a two-group system—emotional and social problems—because it is simple and makes sense relative to the concepts underlying the definition of emotional disturbance. Grouping behavior problems this way also provides direction for identifying appropriate instructional activities.

Bringing Learning to Life: How Bryce's Teachers Helped Him Improve Social Interactions

Working collaboratively with a special education teacher, Bryce's teachers decided to gather data on the extent of occurrences of the following behaviors reflective of general social withdrawal:

Sitting alone at lunch or another activity in which others are actively interacting

Failing to be selected by classmates as a team member or group participant

Failing or being rejected following attempts to socialize with classmates

Seldom volunteering answers or offering opinions during group discussions

Here's what they found for Bryce and a randomly selected classmate (in percentages that indicate how often each behavior occurred):

<i>Behavior</i>	<i>Bryce</i>	<i>Shavon</i>
Sitting alone	83%	35%
Peer selection	5%	65%
Peer rejection	75%	28%
Volunteering answers	3%	82%

Bryce's teachers decided that the social withdrawal they were seeing required intervention. Here are a few things they tried:

They provided a tape recorder and notebook for Bryce to use to communicate with teachers. This was helpful because it reduced the need for Bryce to have face-to-face conversations. When the level of Bryce's communicating increased, the teachers encouraged more traditional interactions.

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14 Teaching Students With Emotional Disturbance

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They paired Bryce with two competent classmates for a “group spelling test” and set a rule that each member of the group had to spell at least one word on the test. They gradually increased the size of the group and the amount of interaction required of each member.

They arranged for Bryce to be in charge of key classroom materials (e.g., hall passes, headsets), so other students would be forced to interact with him to obtain them.

They kept track of improvements in Bryce’s social interactions and frequently sent progress reports home (initially every day, then at least twice a week, then weekly).

Communication Characteristics

Although many students with emotional disturbance have language problems, there are no communication characteristics that are universal or specific to most emotional disturbances. Students with schizophrenia sometimes do demonstrate abnormal language and communication skills. Many never speak, while others develop language and speech disorders like echolalia (parrot-like imitation of speech), illogical or disorganized speech, and inadequate comprehension of verbal instructions. Students with schizophrenia represent a very small percentage of those classified as having emotional disturbance. Communication patterns for most students with emotional disturbance are similar to those of their peers; however, there may be some evidence of extremes in their use of language (e.g., more frequent lying, exaggeration, or overstatement; excessive storytelling; and intensive shyness during oral presentations).

WHAT ASSESSMENTS WILL TELL YOU

In nearly every state, students must be declared eligible before they can receive formal special education services. This usually

means that a local educational agency team (that includes teachers, parents, and other professionals) conducts a formal educational assessment to determine whether the student has a disability and to determine that the student's individual needs justify special education services. Before conducting this evaluation, school personnel must obtain informed consent from the parent(s) or guardian(s) of the student. In making these decisions, the agency team must ensure that the disability is not due to a lack of instruction in reading or math or due to limited English proficiency. Further, the formal educational assessment to determine eligibility must use a variety of tools and strategies to gather relevant information, including information provided by the family and information reflecting the extent to which the student is involved in general curriculum. No single procedure can be used as the sole criterion for determining whether a student is eligible for special education services or for determining what constitutes an appropriate educational program. Teams are expected to use technically sound instruments that may assess the relative contribution of cognitive and behavioral factors, in addition to physical, academic, or other developmental factors. Another expectation is that tests and other formal evaluation materials will be selected and administered so as not to discriminate on a racial or cultural basis; will be provided and administered in the student's native language or other mode of communication; will be validated for the specific purpose for which they are used; will be administered by trained and knowledgeable personnel; and will be administered in accordance with any instructions provided by the producer of such tests. Functional behavioral assessment is one of the most widely used tools, providing relevant information that directly assists team members in determining the educational needs of students with behavior problems.

Functional Behavioral Assessment

Functional behavioral assessment uses a variety of techniques and strategies to diagnose the causes of problem behaviors and to identify likely interventions. This procedure goes beyond simply naming problems, focusing instead on identifying factors that start, maintain, and stop behaviors. The

16 Teaching Students With Emotional Disturbance

first step in conducting a functional behavioral assessment is to define the problem behavior in terms that are easy to understand and simple to measure and record. Effective behavioral definitions communicate what will be seen or observed when a problem is exhibited (e.g., Morgan makes irrelevant comments and inappropriate sounds during class discussions). Once the behavior has been defined, the next step is identifying contextual factors that control it. This information helps teachers and other professionals predict when a problem is likely to occur and provides a basis for deciding what to do to improve the behavior in the future. After collecting data on a student's behavior, and after developing predictions about the behavior, team members complete the functional behavioral assessment by developing intervention plans that emphasize the skills students need in order to behave in a more appropriate manner. Generally, plans that include teaching appropriate behavior and providing motivation to conform to required standards will be more effective than plans that simply serve to control behavior. The following section describes the strategies that teams may consider when developing **behavior intervention plans** for students with emotional disturbance.