NASET's HOW TO Series

January 2014

How To Work with the Student with Emotional Disturbance in the Classroom

What is emotional disturbance?

A student can be defined as having an emotionally disability if he/she exhibits certain behavior patterns to a marked extent and over a prolonged period of time. Such patterns may include:

• An inability to learn on a consistent basis which cannot be explained by intellectual capability, hearing and vision status, and physical health anomalies.

• An inability or unwillingness to develop or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers, teachers, parents, or other adults.

•Extreme over-reactions to minimally stressful situations over a prolonged period of time.

•A general pervasive mood of sadness or depression.

•A tendency to develop somatic complaints, pains or excessive fears associated with home, school or social situations.

Some common characteristics of emotional disorders that may be observed by the teacher over a period of time include:

• academic underachievement

• social isolation or withdrawal

• excessive lateness

• excessive absences

• frequent trips to the nurse

• negativism

• open defiance to authority or rules

• highly distractible

• poor social relationships

• feelings of hopelessness

• verbal aggression

• confrontational behavior

• inappropriate classroom behaviors

• impulsive behavior

• rigid behavior patterns

• anxious and worried, excessive fears and phobias

• easily frustrated even when confronted with a simple task

• resistance to change

Since the behavior of emotionally disabled children can vary from withdrawal, in the case of depression, to aggressive tendencies, in the case of a conduct disorder, teachers need to be aware of techniques which can be utilized in a variety of situations. However, certain behaviors should be targeted as priorities when dealing with emotionally disabled children in the classroom. These target behaviors include:

• Attendance and tardiness

• Challenges to authority

• Inappropriate verbalizations and outbursts

• Incomplete class work

• Difficulty remaining seated

• Social relationships

• Following directions and paying attention

While many or all of these behaviors may be exhibited by the emotionally disabled child, the teacher should try to focus on one target pattern at a time. Patience, fairness, willingness to confront inappropriate behaviors, a sense of conviction in maintaining boundaries and a fair sense of play in establishing consequences are all aspects required by the teacher in these situations.

Dealing with problems of attendance and tardiness

• Reward the child for being on time. This reward can be extra free time, a token, if a token economy is being used, a note home, a verbal compliment and so on.

• Work with the parent on rewarding on time behavior.

• Plan a special activity in the morning.

• Use a chart to visually project the pattern of punctuality and lateness for the child. This reduces the child's level of denial and may make him more aware his behavior.

• Encourage and assist the child to start a club in his/her area of greatest interest and make participation contingent upon his positive pattern of attendance.

• Use a point system for on time attendance. These points may be later turned in for class privileges.

• Set up a buddy system if the child walks to school to encourage on time behavior.

• Set up a nightly contract for the child listing all the things he/she needs to do to make the morning easier to manage. Have the parent sign it and reward the child when he brings it in.

Dealing with challenges to authority, inappropriate verbalizations and outbursts

• Arrange a time out area in the classroom. In this case the time spent in the area is not as significant as you being able to begin the consequence and end it. Therefore make the time out period something you can control.

• Structure a time where the child is allowed to speak to you freely without an audience around. In this way, the child will have an opportunity to speak his concerns rather than act them out. It will also allow you to deflect any confrontations to that specific time.

• Approach the child as often as possible and ask him/her if there is anything bothering them that they would like to speak about. Offering them the opportunity, even if they refuse, may reduce their need for "spot light" behaviors in front of the class.

• Offer an emotional vocabulary so that the child is more able to label feelings. Tension is expressed either verbally or behaviorally. Providing the student with the proper labels may reduce frustration.

• Move the student away from those who might set him off.

• Pre-emt his/her behavior by waiting outside before class and telling him/her in private what you expect during class. Also make him/her aware of the rewards and consequences of his/her actions.

• Offer other options and indicate that any inappropriateness is his/her decision. Making the child aware that behavior is his/her responsibility allows him/her to realize that not doing something inappropriate is also in their control.

• Establish clear classroom rules stating rewards and consequences.

• Praise student for complying to rules and carrying out directions without verbal resistance.

Dealing with incomplete class work

• Work out a contract with the child where he/she can determine the rewards for completion.

• Give shorter but more frequent assignments.

• Do not force the child to write if handwriting is beyond correction. Compensate with a word processor or typewriter.

• Correct assignments as soon as possible and hand them back for immediate gratification.

• Reward students for handing in neat, completed and timely assignments.

• Help the student become organized by keeping very little in his/her desk, using a bound book for writing rather than a loose-leaf where pages can fall out and add to disorganization, use large folders for the child to keep work in and so on.

•Have students mark their own work.

• Be very specific on what you mean by "neat", "organized", and so on. Abstract labels have different meanings to different people. Instead say,

“Please be neat and by neat I mean...."

Dealing with the child's difficulty in remaining seated

• Try to determine a pattern when the child gets up out of his/her seat. Once this is determined you can arrange to have him/her run an errand, come up to your desk and so on. In this way you are channeling the tension and in remaining in control.

• Use an external control like an egg timer so that the child has an anchor to control his behavior.

• Praise other students or hand out rewards for remaining in their seats and following the rules.

• Give the child a written copy of the rules that will result in reward or positive feedback. Also give him/her a list of the behaviors that will lead to consequences.

• Close proximity to the child will assist him/her in staying in his/her seat. Seat him/her close to your desk or stand near him/her during a lesson.

Helping the child develop social relationships

• Role play with another student during private time so that the child can get feedback from a peer.

• Provide the child with a "toolbox" of responses and options for typical social situations.

• Speak with the school psychologist about including him/her in a group.

• Arrange for a peer to guide him/her through social situations. The child may be more willing to model peer behavior.

• Start the child in a small group activity with only one child. Slowly increase the size of the group as the child becomes more comfortable.

• Arrange for goal oriented projects where students must work together to accomplish a task. At first limit this to the student and one other child.

• Have the child and responsible peer organize team activities or group projects. Some children raise to the occasion when placed in a leadership role.

• Praise the student as often as realistic when not exhibiting aggressive or inappropriate social behavior.

Helping the child follow directions and pay attention

• Use a cue before giving the child directions or important information.

• Give one direction at a time and make it as simple as possible.

• Have the child chart his/her own patterns of behavior in relation to attention and direction.

• Physical proximity may assist the child in focusing on your directions.

• Praise the student when he/she follows directions or pays attention. However, be aware that if some emotionally disabled students have a hard time accepting praise, especially in front of a group, accomplish this in private.

• Provide optional work areas that may have less distraction.

• Randomly question the child and try to have them participate as often as possible to increase their interest in the lesson.

• Make sure the materials being presented are compatible with the child's learning levels. In this way you can avoid frustration which is also a cause of inattention.

• Use a variety of visual and auditory techniques, i.e. overhead projector, tape recorder, computer, to enhance the lesson and stimulate attention.