

General Characteristics of Emotional Disturbance vs. Social Maladjustment

Introduction

A student who receives special education services under the category of Emotional Disability has emotional problems of some kind that are adversely affecting his/her educational performance. Usually schools look at grades, discipline records, and performance on achievement tests to quantify educational impact. In determining eligibility for Emotional Disability, several evaluations are typically completed.

A school will conduct psychological testing by a school psychologist, which will include cognitive testing and social/emotional measures (rating scales, interviews, observations). Educational testing is typically completed to determine current levels of achievement in reading, writing, math, and other educational areas. Additionally, a Sociocultural evaluation or interview by a school social worker is typically completed with a parent to rule out environmental factors and obtain a developmental history. (See SPED testing for more information)

Often, the most difficult part of determining eligibility for special education services in this category is determining if the student has an emotional disability or social maladjustment. The following is adapted from a chart that was shown at a training I attended by Bruce Bracken. He adapted it from Social Maladjustment: A Guide to Differential Diagnosis and Educational Options (Wayne County Regional Educational Service Agency - Michigan, 2004).

Behavior Area	Emotional Disturbance	Socially Maladjusted
School Behavior	Unable to comply with teacher requests; needy or has difficulty asking for help	Unwilling to comply with teacher requests; truancy; rejects help
Attitude Toward School	School is a source of confusion or angst; does much better with structure	Dislikes school, except as a social outlet; rebels against rules and structure
School Attendance	Misses school due to emotional or psychosomatic issues	Misses school due to choice
Educational Performance	Uneven achievement; impaired by anxiety, depression, or emotions	Achievement influenced by truancy, negative attitude toward school, avoidance
Peer Relations and Friendships	Difficulty making friends; ignored or rejected	Accepted by a same delinquent or socio-cultural subgroup
Perceptions of	Perceived as bizarre or odd;	Perceived as cool, tough,

Peers	often ridiculed	charismatic
Social Skills	Poorly developed; immature; difficulty reading social cues; difficulty entering groups	Well developed; well attuned to social cues
Interpersonal Relations	Inability to establish or maintain relationships; withdrawn; social anxiety	Many relations within select peer group; manipulative; lack of honesty in relationships
Interpersonal Dynamics	Poor self-concept; overly dependent; anxious; fearful; mood swings; distorts reality	Inflated self concept; independent; underdeveloped conscience; blames others; excessive bravado
Locus of Disorder	Affective disorder; internalizing	Conduct disorder, externalizing
Aggression	Hurts self and others as an end	Hurts others as a means to an end
Anxiety	Tense; fearful	Appears relaxed; “cool”
Affective Reactions	Disproportionate reactions, but not under student’s control	Intentional with features of anger and rage; explosive
Conscience	Remorseful; self critical; overly serious	Little remorse; blaming; non-empathetic
Sense of Reality	Fantasy; naïve; gullible; thought disorders	“Street-wise”; manipulates facts and rules for own benefit
Developmental Appropriateness	Immature; regressive	Age appropriate or above
Risk Taking	Avoids risks; resists making choices	Risk taker; “daredevil”
Substance Abuse	Less likely; may use individually	More likely; peer involvement
Adapted from <i>Social Maladjustment: A Guide to Differential Diagnosis and Educational Options</i> (Wayne County Regional Educational Service Agency - Michigan , 2004)		