

# EMOTIONAL & BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS



## Definition

Anyone who has children or interacts with them on a daily basis knows that children's behavior exists on a continuum. There is no special point on the continuum at which we can define a behavior as a serious problem. Instead, it is important to understand that the effect of an emotional or behavioral disorder can range from very mild to very severe. To further complicate the matter, while it is easy to identify those children/youth who display inappropriate behaviors (i.e., defiance, aggression, anger), it is much more difficult to identify those children who do not openly display such behaviors (i.e., depression, obsessive compulsive behavior).

Unlike disabilities such as Down's syndrome or physical impairments, emotional and behavior disorders are generally not physically observable. Consequently, some people may not view this group of children as having a disability and, instead, view them as troublemakers who choose to misbehave. This is not the case. The term emotional and behavior disorder encompasses a large number of disorders: Adjustment Disorders; Anxiety Disorders; Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD); Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); Selective Mutism; Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD); Conduct Disorder; Anorexia Nervosa; Bulimia Nervosa; Bipolar Disorder; Major Depressive Disorder; Autism; Schizophrenia; and Seriously Emotionally Disturbed.

## Characteristics

A child/youth with an emotional/behavioral disorder will exhibit one or more of the following characteristics:

- Disrupts classroom activities
- Resistant to change and transitions in routine
- Preoccupied
- Regularly absent from school
- Consistently blames others for their dishonesty
- Cannot apply social rules to others' personal space/belongings
- Impulsive behavior
- Does not follow or appear to care about rules
- Poor concentration
- Intimidates and bullies others
- Experiences difficulty working in groups
- Often is manipulative in situations
- Inattentive and distractible
- Often speaks out with irrelevant information with no turn taking
- Demonstrates aggression
- Low self-esteem
- Frequently demonstrates self-injurious behavior



# Working with Children/Youth with Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders

Working with children and youth with emotional/behavioral disorders does not have to be difficult or time consuming. The following easily implemented strategies can make a big difference in the child's/youth's behavior:

- Teach and support social and emotional competencies.
- Create a system that encourages child/youth engagement, safety, and a positive climate.
- Foster engaging, useful and positive learning opportunities.
- Collaborate with families as to the strengths and needs of the child/youth.
- Provide immediate encouragement and feedback.
- Build upon the child's/youth's interests.
- Allow the child/youth to make choices.
- Set rules and expectations and the consequences associated with not complying with the rules and expectations.
- Promote self-esteem and confidence every change you get. Catch the child doing something great and praise him/her. Be sure to praise the act not the child. In other words, you might say, "I really like the way you helped Bobby clean up the table. Helping someone shows them that you are a friend." Likewise, if you see the child/youth engaged in inappropriate behavior, you point out the behavior was inappropriate rather than telling the child/youth he/she is bad. The praise is directed at the action instead of telling the child/youth he is good/bad.
- Provide the child/youth with opportunities to become responsible.
- Always be objective and understanding – do not lose your patience, as many times that is what the child/youth wants.
- Promote cooperation. Encourage positive interactions among children/youth. Using a variety of groupings promotes strong social foundations for ALL children/youth.

## Additional Resources:

The following websites are general emotional/behavioral disorder resources. If you want more specific information, do a web search related to that specific disorder.

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities

<http://nichcy.org/disability/specific/emotionaldisturbance>

PACER Center <http://www.pacer.org/ebd/>

Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders <http://www.ccbd.net/home>

Kids Mental Health <http://www.kidsmentalhealth.org/childrens-behavioral-and-emotional-disorders/>

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Cathann A. Kress, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

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