

Position Statement on Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

The National Association of School Psychologists is committed to promoting effective services to meet the educational and mental health needs of all students. Emotional and behavioral disorders are important barriers to learning and development, interfere with the acquisition of academic, vocational, and social skills, and negatively affect adult adjustment (Merrell & Walker, 2004; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Children with emotional and behavioral problems are under-identified within the educational system, and only a relatively small number of students receive needed mental health services. It is the position of the National Association of School Psychologists that children with these disorders should receive comprehensive assessment and intervention services in a collaborative fashion that recognizes the critical role of the family and other community service providers. Services to students with emotional and behavioral disorders should be sensitive to the need for the involvement and perspectives of persons from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Definition

There is a wide discrepancy across the states in the definition used to describe these disorders and the services provided to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Adoption of a single comprehensive definition is necessary to ensure consistent and effective identification and intervention for students. The National Association of School Psychologists endorses the following definition of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders adapted from that developed by the National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition (Forness & Knitzer, 1992) for the identification of students who are in need of specialized educational services in the school:

- Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD) refers to a condition in which behavioral or emotional responses of an individual in school are so different from his/her generally accepted, age appropriate, ethnic or cultural norms that they adversely affect performance in such areas as self care, social relationships, personal adjustment, academic progress, classroom behavior, or work adjustment.
- EBD is more than a transient, expected response to stressors in the child's or youth's environment and would persist even with individualized interventions, such as feedback to the individual, consultation with parents or families, and/or modification of the educational environment.
- The identification of EBD must be based on multiple sources of data about the individual's behavioral or emotional functioning. EBD must be exhibited in at least two different settings, at least one of which is school related.
- EBD can co-exist with other disabilities.
- This category may include children or youth with schizophrenia, affective disorders, anxiety disorders, or who have other sustained disturbances of behavior, emotions, attention, or adjustment.

Children with emotional and/or behavior disorders are a diverse group whose difficulties exist along continua of intensity, duration and frequency of occurrence. The use of

additional formal diagnosis (e.g., the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) is appropriate, but no single diagnosis should be used to deny services to students. The impact of the behavior on the student's educational progress must be the guiding principle for identification.

Assessment and Identification

The goals of the assessment of children with emotional or behavioral disorders are to (a) gather relevant information about the student in social and instructional environments, (b) assimilate the data to create a comprehensive picture of concerns, and (c) develop short and long term goals and strategies for intervention. The assessment must identify both the strengths and needs of the student, and the people and systems with which the student interacts (Rudolph & Epstein, 2000). It is important that appropriate assessment methods are selected so that they not only inform the identification of children with emotional and/or behavior disorders, but also the development of interventions. Following are characteristics of an effective identification process:

1. Comprehensiveness: The assessment should provide information about:

- Specificity: The objective and observable description of the student's difficulties;
- Environmental Factors: The people and systems that impact the student and the relationship between the instructional, social and community environment and the specific difficulties demonstrated by the student;
- Strengths: The strengths and available resources of the student, family, teacher(s) and school setting, especially as these may be useful to the development of intervention plans;
- History: The duration of the difficulties, their relationship to specific developmental or situational stressors and any previous attempts to resolve the student's difficulties;
- Intensity: The severity of the difficulties as they affect academic achievement, social skills, and interpersonal relationships within the family, community and school settings;
- Pervasiveness: The extent to which difficulties occur in different situations within the school, family or community settings;
- Persistence: The extent to which difficulties have continued despite the use of well-planned, empirically based and individualized intervention strategies provided within the least restrictive environments;
- Developmental and cultural functioning: The student's current developmental status and the extent to which the student's behavior is different from the behavior expected for children of the same age, culture, and ethnic background; and
- Cognitive and academic functioning: The child's cognitive abilities and academic performance.

2. Uses multiple sources of information: Children's behavior often varies from setting to setting, and information should be obtained from a variety of sources (McConaughy & Ritter, 2002). School psychologists should use information from the following sources when feasible:

- Family members
- Community treatment providers
- Teachers and other school personnel
- Social service workers
- School records, medical records, or other relevant records.

3. Employs appropriate assessment methods: The potential effects of identifying a child as having an emotional or behavioral disorder necessitate the use of instruments that have empirically demonstrated high reliability and validity. Both indirect and direct assessment methods should be used as appropriate.

- Indirect methods may include behavior checklists, structured interviews, rating scales, and other appropriate assessment techniques. Assessments that are specific to one emotional or behavioral dimension (e.g., ADHD) should not be used in isolation, but should be part of a more comprehensive assessment of multiple emotional and behavioral domains.
- Direct methods may include behavior observation, standardized self-reports from a child, curriculum-based assessment, and analysis of work samples should also be considered. Functional behavior assessment procedures are recommended to gather information about the child's behavior in relationship to the instructional and social environment (Knoster & McCurdy, 2002).
- Norms should be representative, current and appropriate for the individual being assessed in terms of age, culture/ethnicity, and gender.

4. Provides a comprehensive formulation of the relevant issues: The results of the assessment should provide working hypotheses about a child's behavioral and emotional functioning, developmental history, areas of significant impairment in school (academic achievement, adaptive behavior, social skills, and interpersonal relationships), and impairment outside the school setting (vocational skills, and function within the community). The presence of social maladjustment along with emotional and behavioral disorders should be noted for planning interventions (McConaughy & Ritter, 2002; Merrell & Walker, 2004).

Intervention

Services for students with emotional and behavioral disorders are frequently marginalized, fragmented and incomplete (Adelman & Taylor, 2000). Because emotional and behavioral disorders have multidimensional facets, interventions for children with these disorders must be multifaceted and comprehensive (Quinn & McDougal, 1998). Eligibility for individualized services under the category of emotional/behavioral disorders should not automatically imply placement in a categorical special education program. Interventions should be planned by a team that includes (as appropriate) the parent, the child whenever possible, the school psychologist and other student services personnel, teachers, administrators, and community service providers. Intervention plans should take into account the strengths of the child, the family, the child's teacher(s), and the school. Children with significant emotional or behavioral disorders often need

interventions provided both inside and outside of the school; therefore collaboration and coordination of services provided in the school and community will be required (Stroul, 1996). Careful attention to the use of effective discipline practices is critical as children with emotional and behavioral disorders frequently have disruptive behaviors. The discipline system in the school should be used to support the student with an emotional and behavior disorder in becoming more effective in school.

The following intervention approaches should be considered in developing a comprehensive school intervention plan for children and youth with emotional or behavioral disorders:

- Individualized academic and curricular interventions. Academic difficulties often take a back seat to the student's behavioral difficulties. Students may benefit from adaptations to the curriculum, alteration of the pace of delivery, improvements to the instructional and organizational ecology, and instruction in learning and study skills.
- Consultation with teachers and other service providers. Interventions to reduce disruptive behaviors in the classroom do have demonstrated effectiveness (Stage & Quiroz, 1997). Teachers may benefit from consultation directed at understanding the needs of the student and applying the most effective strategies to help improve behavior. In addition, teachers and other service providers will require support in monitoring the effectiveness of interventions and in altering interventions in response to effectiveness data. The social support component of consultation to deal with the frustration and isolation teachers may experience when working with a student with significant problems is also important.
- Consultation and partnership with parents. Parents will benefit from information that assists them in understanding their child's difficulties, developing and implementing effective behavior management strategies, and working collaboratively with other caregivers. The parent may also need assistance with negotiating the array of services available in the community.
- Individual and group counseling. Counseling may help the student improve social and school adjustment. Students frequently need assistance in dealing with environmental stressors, identifying appropriate emotional and behavioral strategies, and understanding responsibility and self-directedness.
- Social skills training. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders frequently have deficits in the acquisition or execution of social skills. Training that is aimed at increasing social skills in the child's multiple environments is often helpful.
- Career, vocational and transitional planning. Interventions addressing career exploration, the development of pre-vocational and vocational skills, and transition to the post- secondary education world should be included for all adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorders.
- Appropriate educational settings. Children should be provided services in the least restrictive environment that meets the student's academic, psychological and social needs. Many students' needs can be effectively addressed through consultation with teachers and parents, short term counseling, and interventions in the regular classroom setting. Only those students who cannot be served

- appropriately in the regular classroom, based upon reliable and valid data, are considered for more restrictive programs.
- Effective discipline practices. Discipline strategies should be developed that support the development of effective behavior to the fullest extent possible. Careful analysis of the manifestations of these disorders in the school environment is necessary. Teachers and administrators will benefit from consultation in the identification, use, and evaluation of effective discipline strategies.
 - Crisis planning and management. Potential precursors to crises should be identified and plans for dealing with crises should be a part of the student's intervention plan.

The Role of the School Psychologist

In the *Guidelines for the Provision of School Psychological Services* (National Association of School Psychologists, 2000), NASP promotes school psychological services that "are provided in a coordinated, organized fashion and are delivered in a manner that ensures the provision of a comprehensive and seamless continuum of services...." School psychologists' knowledge of learning, development and emotional functioning make them especially qualified to provide a range of services to children suspected of having EBD, including assessment, consultation, counseling, intervention programs, and crisis intervention. School psychologists are in a position to provide assistance to other members of the health care and educational team in developing and executing comprehensive intervention plans. School psychologists can also serve as a liaison between families and community service providers. School psychologists play an important role in ensuring that these students receive comprehensive assessment and intervention services in a collaborative family- and community-oriented fashion. School psychologists are encouraged to bring vision to the assessment and intervention process and promote the development of programs and services that creatively address the issues of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Building an expanded capacity for intervention with a variety of stakeholders is critical to the establishment of effective services in the future.

Summary

Early identification and intervention for students with emotional and/or behavioral problems is essential to reduce the negative effects on academic and social adjustment. School psychologists play an important role in ensuring that these students receive comprehensive assessment and intervention services in a collaborative family- and community-oriented fashion.

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