

Case 3: Emotional and Behavior Disorders

- Define emotional and behavior disorders, explain their prevalence and causes, and outline the development of the emotional and behavior disorders field.
- Describe characteristics of individuals with emotional and behavior disorders.
- Explain how emotional and behavior disorders are identified.
- Describe recommended educational practices for students with emotional and behavior disorders.
- Explain the perspectives and concerns that parents and families of students with emotional and behavior disorders may have.

Case

Garrett

Garrett is a challenge for his teachers, and they are very concerned about his well-being. Garrett's physical appearance is consistent with his emotional response to others: He is a somewhat overweight sixth-grade, large for his age, with a noticeably pale complexion and long, thin, often dirty hair plastered to his scalp. His face is expressionless, and he often sits motionless for long periods. Unless coaxed, he does not speak in class or for that matter in the halls or the cafeteria. His special education teacher describes him as always being in "emotional neutral"; he does not laugh at jokes or other students' antics and he does not appear to be motivated by any system of rewards that school personnel have designed for him, even with his input. His general education teachers comment that he does not participate in class discussions or activities; that he does not complete in-class or homework assignments; and that he seems content to simply sit, almost as though he is letting all the instruction and interactions of middle school classes roll right over him. Academically, Garrett is barely passing his core classes, but his teachers are not sure that this is an accurate reflection of his ability. Garrett lives with his grandmother, who is his legal guardian. She is reluctant to come to school to discuss Garrett's problems. She describes Garrett as well behaved and much less of a burden to raise than his older brother. She explains that Garrett spends most of his time at home in his room, watching television, mentioning only that he is not much help with household chores.

Introduction

Of all the school-age students who have disabilities, few can be as puzzling as those who have emotional and behavior disorders. These students defy simple description, and at times it is difficult to understand how they can be grouped into a single disability category. When compared to other students with disabilities, these students are more likely to have attended multiple schools, and they are four times more likely to have been suspended or expelled from school (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005). Their teachers often report that they feel unprepared to work with them (Wagner et al., 2006). These students pose unique challenges to school personnel because they often need structure and therapeutic intervention strategies that are difficult to provide. At the same time, successful outcomes for students with emotional and behavior disorders rely on those interventions.

What Is Emotional and Behavior Disorders?

Development of the Field of Emotional and Behavior Disorders

Even as the field of special education in public schools began to evolve with the advent of compulsory schooling early in the twentieth century, children with emotional and behavior disorders generally were considered ill; thus, their treatment was considered the responsibility of physicians and psychologists, not teachers and other education professionals (Coleman & Webber, 2002). From the late 1930s through the 1950s, professionals worked to classify the various types of emotional and behavior disorders they observed in children (Coleman & Webber, 2002). In the 1960s strong criticism was leveled at the continued medical focus for treating these students, and schools gradually began to take responsibility for them. By the time Public Law (P.L.) 94-142 was passed in 1975, students with emotional and behavior disorders were without question being educated in public schools. Since the passage of federal special education laws, professionals in the area of emotional and behavior disorders have been researching factors that cause these disorders, studying effective interventions, and striving to ensure that all students who have these disorders are identified and served appropriately.

Definitions of Emotional and Behavior Disorders

Federal Definition

The term used in IDEA for emotional and behavior disorders is emotional disturbance (ED), which the law defines as

a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to marked degree that adversely affects a child's education performance:

1. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
2. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
3. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
4. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
5. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associate with personal or school problems.

Almost since the passage of P.L. 94-142, professionals have criticized the federal definition of emotional and behavior disorders. A group of thirty professional organizations joined together as the National Coalition of Mental Health and Special

Education to lobby for change. They contended that the federal definition had several significant problems (Forness & Knitzer, 1992). First, they argued that the five criteria in the definition were not supported by research. Second, they noted that the reference to educational performance too narrowly focused on academic learning, excluding the important but indirect social curriculum of education. A third criticism of the federal definition was particularly significant. The coalition maintained that the exclusionary clause concerning social maladjustment was unnecessarily confusing and that the intent was to exclude only juvenile delinquents, not all students with conduct disorders, which are emotional and behavior problems involving aggression, destruction of property, lying or stealing, or serious rule violation (e.g., running away). The coalition proposed this alternative definition (Forness & Knitzer, 1992, p. 14).

The term emotional or behavioral disorder means a disability characterized by behavioral or emotional responses in school so different from appropriate age, cultural, or ethnic norms that they adversely affect educational performance. Educational performance includes academic, social, vocational, and personal skills. Such a disability

- a. is more than a temporary, expected response to stressful events in the environment;
- b. is consistently exhibited in two different settings, at least one of which is school-related; and
- c. is unresponsive to direct intervention in general education or the child's condition is such that general education interventions would be insufficient.

Prevalence of Emotional and Behavior Disorders

According to the federally collected IDEA data (U.S. Department of education, 2004), 480,187 students ages six to twenty-one received special education services as emotionally disturbed during the 2002-2003 school year, making this the fourth-largest disability category. However, data on prevalence from schools is only one source of information concerning this group of youngsters. Prevalence estimates using data from mental health clinics, private practitioners, and other community sources indicate that many more children and youth have emotional and behavior disorders than are recognized in schools.

Causes of Emotional and Behavior Disorders

Emotional and behavior disorders include a wide variety of complex problems, and seldom can any single, clear cause be identified for them. Two types of factors contribute to the development of emotional and behavior disorders: biological factors (e.g., children whose mothers abused alcohol or drugs during pregnancy, brain injury, etc.) and psychosocial

Students with Emotional and Behavior — Key Points Extracted from Marilyn Friend (2008) Special Education: Contemporary Perspectives for School Professionals, Chapter 7.

factors (e.g., chronic stress, stressful life events, childhood maltreatment, and additional family factors).

What Are the Characteristics of Individuals with Emotional and Behavior Disorders?

Behavior and Emotional Characteristics

The behaviors of students with emotional and behavior disorders often are not completely different from those of other students. Rather, they occur more often, with more intensity, and for a longer time. Further, the behaviors of these students cover an entire spectrum. One of the most common ways of conceptualizing these behaviors is to think of them as being either internalizing or externalizing.

Internalizing behaviors

Internalizing behaviors are those characterized as withdrawn or directed inward. Not surprisingly, because students with internalizing behaviors often do not disrupt the classroom, their needs can be overlooked by busy educators unless they are particularly vigilant.

Externalizing behaviors

Externalizing behaviors are those characterized as directed toward others; when students display these behaviors, they generally bother both teachers and other students. They are aggressive, they violate school rules and commit crimes, and they might be described as acting out. As you might expect, students with externalizing behaviors are very likely to be identified by their teachers as needing assistance, particularly if they exhibit two or more externalizing behaviors (Carlson, Tamm, & Gaub, 1997).

Social Characteristics

Students with emotional and behavior disorders experience significant challenges in establishing and maintaining social relationships with peers and adults.

Cognitive and Academic Characteristics

The first step in understanding the cognitive and academic characteristics of students with emotional and behavior disorders is to recognize the guidelines that are used in identifying these students. If a student's cognitive ability is below a certain level—usually an IQ of about 70—he generally will be considered to have an intellectual disability and any behavior problems he displays will be thought of as secondary to or caused by his primary disability. The student generally will not be identified as having an emotional or behavior disorder. Thus, you might think that students with emotional and behavior disorders could have a cognitive ability from a low-average to a gifted range because there is no direct relationship between intelligence and emotional problems.

How Are Emotional and Behavior Disorders Identified?

Once assessment data have been gathered from formal assessments, classroom assessments, and/or other assessment strategies, the multidisciplinary team, including the parents, meets to make the critical decisions regarding eligibility. The team must address the following questions in deciding whether a student has an emotional or behavior disorder and should receive special education:

1. Does the student have one or more of the characteristics in the definition of emotional disturbance?
2. Do the student's characteristics, as assessed, adversely affect educational performance?
3. Can social maladjustment be eliminated as the sole cause of the student's behavior problems?

What Are Recommended Educational Practices for Students with Emotional and Behavior Disorders?

A strong base of research has developed over the past twenty-five years that can guide school professionals in their work with students with emotional and behavior disorder. Effective practices include prevention, collaboration, procedures required by IDEA, and specific interventions (e.g., behavior intervention plan).

Example of Classroom Interventions

Peer-mediated Instruction

In one successful peer-tutoring approach, called *reciprocal tutoring*, both students take both roles in a single tutoring session. For peer tutoring and cooperative learning to be effective with these students, it must be implemented carefully, following methods that have been demonstrated through research to be effective. In addition, students should receive instruction in appropriate leadership, communication, decision-making, and trust-building skills (Sutherland, Wehby, & Gunter, 2000). Finally, teachers or others implementing peer tutoring and cooperative learning should assess its impact on student achievement and monitor student behavior in these instructional arrangements.

Teacher-Led Instruction

- Keep lesson objectives clear.
- Deliver lessons in a lively manner, and make sure that students are engaged.
- Use concrete vocabulary and clear, succinct sentences.
- Give all students immediate encouragement and specific feedback.
- Use meaningful materials and provide examples to which students can relate.
- Have students recite in unison.
- Prompt student answers after allowing an appropriate amount of wait time (i.e., to encourage participation, which may vary for each student).
- Break long presentations into shorter segments that include student responding.
- Break down a large assignment into smaller ones. As students finish each mini-assignment, build in reinforcement for task completion.
- When students make mistakes, help them to learn from those mistakes. Be careful not to overcorrect, and praise any progress toward the desired behavior change.

Students with Emotional and Behavior — Key Points Extracted from Marilyn Friend (2008) Special Education: Contemporary Perspectives for School Professionals, Chapter 7.

- Follow low-interest activities with high-interest activities so that students get occasional breaks from difficult or less-interesting activities.
- Build on student interests. Students often learn by relating material to real-life situations that they find interesting.
- Allow students to make choices. Let them decide between two tasks or select the order in which they complete assigned tasks.

What Are the Perspectives of Parents and Families?

The parent and family members of students with emotional and behavior disorders face several unique challenges in working with school professionals (Taylor-Richardson, Heflinger, & Brown, 2006). First, these families are more likely than families of other students to have a low income and to be headed by a single parent with a less-than-average amount of education (Mundschenk & Foley, 2000). These demographic characteristics by themselves form a barrier to partnership because many school programs assume the existence of a nuclear family.

A second barrier for these families is the often negative set of interactions that occur regarding their children. Teachers frequently are frustrated with students with emotional and behavior disorders; this emotion may lead teachers to have an overall negative perception of the student and the family. Teachers may then contact the family in order to enlist their help in addressing school problems, too often asking the parents to punish the student for behavior problems at school and too seldom involving the parents in reward systems. The parents may not be able to carry out the requests made by the teachers, or the parents' efforts may not be successful. The result may be additional frustration on the parts of teachers and parent alike (Fox, Vaughn, Wyatt, & Dunlap, 2002).

Back to the Case

Garrett

As you review Garrett's story, note that no cause for Garrett's behavior was mentioned and no successful interventions, accommodations, or collaborations were discussed. Instead, we read about a list of Garrett's problems in school and were told that these behaviors are not evident at home or are not seen as problems at home. Now the principal has asked you to take action and has offered his full support to your efforts. Hypothesize about what might happen if the situation continues as is. What do you think should be done? Who should be involved in helping Garrett?

Students with Emotional and Behavior — Key Points Extracted from Marilyn Friend (2008) *Special Education: Contemporary Perspectives for School Professionals*, Chapter 7.

Use with Caution: The contents of this file are some key points extracted from the book, *Special Education: Contemporary Perspectives for Schools Professionals*, written by Marilyn Friend (2008). These contents are only for your instruction preparation resources. If you use any information from this file in your course, please make sure that you give a clear citation in order to avoid plagiarism. In addition, if your class does not use this book as CEP240 does, printing all of the information for class use may violate copy right. It is suggested that you should use the information in this file as references or resources when developing your own course and you should give a clear citation if you use any information from this file in your course.