

# Understanding and Finding Help for Emotional Difficulties at School

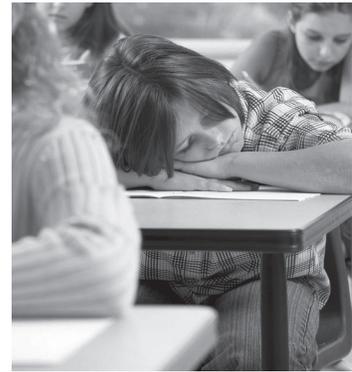
When children and teens have emotional problems, these can affect both home and school. Emotional problems can be complex. While emotional ups and downs are a normal part of growing up, when these get in the way of daily life, it may be time for professional help.

Let the school know if you think your child's issues are causing problems at school. General education counseling might be offered. Counseling can also be part of Special Education. A 504 plan for public school students is another way to support a student. Both a 504 Plan and Special Education have specific eligibility requirements.

Information and understanding can bring help and hope. Never worry alone. Reach out to others.

This packet provides:

- an overview of various emotional difficulties and their effects at school
- resources
- information on Special Education and 504 plans



**Other related information  
packets available at Matrix:**

*Individual Education Plans (IEPs)*

*Assessment*

*Behavior Issues  
and Special Education*

*School Discipline and  
Students with Special Needs*

*Section 504*

*Resolving Disagreements*

*Our libraries in Novato and Fairfield offer many articles, books, DVDs/videos, magazines, and other materials that relate to this topic. We also offer workshops on IEP issues, support groups, and one-on-one consulting with parents. Visit our website, [www.matrixparents.org](http://www.matrixparents.org), for more information.*



# Resources on Emotional Difficulties

## Books

*The Bipolar Child* (2002) – Demetri Papolos, MD

*Emotional and Behavioral Problems of Young Children* (2003) – Gretchen Gimpel Peacock, PhD; and  
Melissa Holland, PhD

*The Explosive Child* (2010) – Ross W. Greene

*Your Defiant Child* (1998) – Russell Barkley

*Freeing Your Child From Anxiety* (2004) – Tamar Ellsas Chansky

*Helping Your Troubled Teen* (2007) – Cynthia Kaplan

*A Relentless Hope: Surviving the Storm of Teen Depression* (2007) – Gary Nelson

*What Now? How Teen Therapeutic Programs Could Save Your Troubled Child* (2008) – Paul Case and John  
McKinnon, MD

*When You Worry About the Child You Love: Emotional and Learning Problems in Children* (1996) – Edward  
Hallowell

## Emotional/Behavioral Issues & Mental Health Websites

[www.mentalhealth.org](http://www.mentalhealth.org)

National Mental Health Information Center

[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill

[www.ffcmh.org](http://www.ffcmh.org)

Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health

[www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)

Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports

[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

[www.ccbd.net](http://www.ccbd.net)

Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders

[www.explosivekids.org](http://www.explosivekids.org)

Parents and Teachers of Explosive Kids

[www.aboutourkids.org](http://www.aboutourkids.org)

Child & Adolescent Mental Health & Parenting Resource

[www.thebalancedmind.org](http://www.thebalancedmind.org)

The Balanced Mind Foundation

[www.depression.org](http://www.depression.org)

National Foundation for Depressive Illness

[www.ocfoundation.org](http://www.ocfoundation.org)

National Obsessive Compulsive Foundation

[www.youthbipolarfoundation.org](http://www.youthbipolarfoundation.org)

Youth Bipolar Foundation of Northern California

## Education and Special Education & Advocacy Websites

[www.disabilityrightsca.org](http://www.disabilityrightsca.org)

Disability Rights California

[www.ed.gov/office/ocr](http://www.ed.gov/office/ocr)

Office of Civil Rights

[www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS)

Federal Department of Education

[www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

National Association of School Psychologists

[www.pent.ca.gov](http://www.pent.ca.gov)

Positive Environments Network of Trainers, California

Department of Education

# Emotional Problems at School: An Overview

When your child has emotional problems, you may hear people use words such as withdrawn, defiant, acting out, disturbed or atypical reactions. You may also hear: emotionally disturbed or mental health issues. Until an issue is better understood, labels can be confusing. Emotional issues sometimes are the result of another disability. For example, a child with a learning disability who struggles with learning may become depressed. A child with autism may show anxiety from feeling lost in the social world. When there is more than one diagnosis you may hear the terms “co-existing” or “co-morbid” conditions.



## **Work in partnership with the school**

A school may first have a Student Study Team meeting with you. This meeting is to talk about what may be going on and what steps to take. If the issues are not too complex, the school counselor or psychologist may offer general education counseling. If issues are deep or don't improve, an assessment for a 504 Plan or Special Education might be a next step. A parent needs to put in writing a request for such an assessment.

## **504 Plans**

The federal Rehabilitation Act is an anti-discrimination law. 504 plans are a part of this law and are a written document. The law requires organizations that use federal funds to make reasonable accommodations when the disability of a person impacts a daily life function. Mental illness is a disability that could result in a 504 plan if the eligibility requirements are met. If eligible, schools make accommodations to the general education program so the disability doesn't prevent the student from getting an education. Usually 504 plans are written when a disability does not meet the criteria for Special Education. Our 504 Packet has more information.

## **Special Education**

A student with emotional problems might be eligible for Special Education. There are 13 ways to be eligible. One is Emotionally Disturbed/Seriously Emotionally Disturbed (ED/SED). A child does not need a psychiatric label to be eligible under Emotional Disturbance. Eligibility categories are not diagnoses. They are education terms. If your child is already in Special Education under any of the categories, counseling services could be added to your child's Individual Education Plan (IEP). A student does not need to be eligible as Emotionally Disturbed to have special education counseling. Because emotions affect behavior, a behavior goal or behavior plan could also be added to the IEP. Behavior plans teach and support positive behaviors and reduce negative ones. See our Behavior Packet for more information.

## **Working with professionals outside the school**

School districts only focus on emotional issues seen at school. Other professionals or agencies can help with issues outside the school day, such as substance abuse, running away, self-isolation, or defiance. Coordination and communication between the professionals and family can create a team of support. A child with emotional problems can affect others in the family. Find parent groups, family therapy, and support for you as an individual.

## School Evaluations for Emotional Challenges

When a child's emotional needs get in the way of his or her education, a request can be made for an assessment to see if the needs are severe enough for Special Education or a 504 plan. Put this request in writing. If your child is already in Special Education, the assessment would find out if counseling should be added to the IEP as a related service

Because Special Education counseling is to help students with their emotions so they can benefit from their education, when writing a request for an evaluation, use school examples. Areas might be grades and meeting grade level standards. School attendance, behavior, or discipline are other areas. Examples that a child might have emotional needs that may merit a school evaluation:

- Avoids school — is often absent or tardy, calls to come home, leaves school or classes
- Has grades below C
- Complains of physical symptoms regularly on school days
- Has poor concentration as reported by teachers
- Not able to get homework done
- Feels school life is too hard to handle
- Tells school staff about having racing thoughts, extreme anxiety, or depression
- Thinks about harming someone at school or harming self; or actually harms self or others
- Loses interest in peers at school
- Breaks school rules — this includes using or having illegal substances at school or school events
- Shows flawed thinking during school and learning

While you may worry about other traits outside school, until those affect your child at school, the school may not have reason to evaluate.



What might an evaluation include? School evaluations for emotional problems should involve observing the student, interviewing those who know the student, and using questionnaires for parents, teachers, and the student. Sometimes tests are given to the student to evaluate how he or she views situations. Your written consent is needed for an evaluation to start. Ask questions about what will be in assessment.

**KEY:** Some special needs such as autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, language disabilities, and intellectual disabilities can result in behaviors that look similar to or are mixed together with emotional issues. If your student is not yet eligible for Special Education, make sure your written request for an evaluation reminds the district of its responsibility to evaluate in all areas of suspected disability.

## Eligibility for Special Education and Counseling Services

There are 13 eligibility categories for Special Education. The school district must evaluate in all areas of suspected disability. They must identify the primary eligibility. A student can be eligible under more than one category.

To be eligible for Special Education under the category of Emotional Disturbance, the student must show one or more of the following over a long period of time and to a marked degree, which adversely affects educational performance:

1. An inability to learn not 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 shown in several situations
4. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
5. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems



If a student is eligible as Emotionally Disturbed, the evaluation usually shows that counseling is needed. This is a service in addition to specialized instruction by a special educator. If the student is eligible under a category other than Emotionally Disturbed and there are emotional issues getting in the way of learning, counseling can be added after an evaluation shows this is needed.

**KEY:** A student does *not* need the eligibility of Emotionally Disturbed to have school-based Special Education counseling in his or her IEP.

While assessments are used for eligibility, they also give information to guide what is in the Individual Education Plan (IEP). Assessments help in writing present levels of performance. These are used to write annual goals. Goals determine services. Given how important assessments are, make sure you agree with any assessments before you sign that you agree! Parent written agreement is also needed for eligibility decisions. You never need to decide if you agree or not at an IEP meeting. You can take home the paperwork and decide shortly after the meeting. If you disagree with either the assessments or eligibility, use the rights you have to resolve the dispute. Our Disagreements packet has more information.

## Related Service: Counseling

All students in Special Education must receive specialized instruction. In addition, some students in Special Education need related services to make progress on their IEP goals and to access the curriculum. Related services are the same as Designated Instructional Services (DIS). Counseling is one of several related services.

A student in Special Education does not need to have the Emotionally Disturbed eligibility to have Special Education counseling. Any student in Special Education may have school-based counseling if needed to benefit from his or her education. The counselor will draft IEP counseling goals for your approval. These goals most likely will include teaching your child skills to cope with the emotions that get in the way of learning. As with all services in Special Education, you will receive progress reports during the school year on these goals



In 2010 California changed how mental health services are given to students in Special Education. Information before this date about California law AB 3632 as part of Special Education is out of date. What changed? Instead of County Mental Health Departments giving mental health services, school districts became responsible. The agency or professional used for this Special Education service is now up to your school district. Some districts may use their own psychologists or counselors. Some may hire private agencies or County Mental Health. Special Education counselors need specific credentials.

### Service Options

Assessments are used by the IEP team to decide the level of service your student needs. The IEP team will discuss the goals proposed by the district. The team will also talk about the type of counseling service and how often and where it will take place. As in all parts of Special Education, the school district must offer and provide a free and appropriate education (FAPE). This education must take place in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with supports and services. This means educating your student as much as possible in the general education setting with peers without disabilities. The IEP team must consider all options. Here are a few examples:

- Counseling for the student one or two times per week
- Family counseling related to school, emotions, and learning
- A Special Education class with a counselor on a general education campus, so students can be in general education classes for part of the school day
- A public school that only serves students in Special Education with emotional needs
- Residential 24-hour treatment centers

### Parent Agreement

The parent must agree in writing to Special Education counseling services and goals, and where services will take place. Once you sign that you agree, services can begin. The counselor is now a member of the IEP team. If you do not agree with goals or services, you have a right to sign in disagreement and request local mediation or to use your due process rights. See our packet on Resolving Disagreements.

## Special Education: Other Supports

Students with emotional issues often have behaviors that get in the way of learning. A behavior goal or a Behavior Plan are other supports that can be added to a student's IEP. A behavior plan identifies:

- The problem behavior and how severe it is
- The function of the behavior, or the purpose it is serving
- Triggers in the environment that cause the behavior
- A goal or goals describing what change in behavior is expected after a year of Special Education
- Changes in the environment to minimize the negative behavior
- Curriculum, strategies, or steps for staff to teach the desired behavior and minimize the negative behavior
- Reinforcements that motivate the student to use the positive behavior
- A plan to communicate about the behavior with all key people, including the parents,

Behavior plans can help prevent behaviors that may result in school discipline such as suspensions, expulsion, or SARBs (school attendance review board). While the IEP team must discuss at each annual IEP meeting if the student's behavior is getting in the way of the student's learning or the learning of others, *do not wait* until the annual IEP meeting if you think a behavior plan is needed. If there already is a behavior plan, it can be revised. Put a request in writing for an IEP meeting so the team can discuss how to modify the IEP to address the behavior. See our Behavior information packet for more information.

### Bullying

Some students with emotional problems can either be bullied or can bully others. If either is the case, and it's getting in the way of your student's learning or the learning of others, a goal (or a behavior plan) could be added to the IEP to teach positive social skills during the school day or how to avoid being bullied.



### Transition to Adulthood

A transition plan must be in a student's IEP in the year in which your student turns 16. This plan describes post-secondary school goals. It also states what services and activities are needed to support those goals. When writing or revising the plan, the student must be part of the IEP team to plan for:

- Employment and vocation
- Independent living
- Post-secondary training
- Being part of the community

If needed, the transition plan includes agencies that can support the student after high school.

## In Summary

It has been said that emotions are an “on/off switch” for learning. IEPs can play a role in turning the switch on. An IEP describes the specialized instruction, along with supports and services, that allows a student access his or her education. A 504 plan may also make it possible for a student with emotional challenges to access the curriculum with accommodations in the general education setting.

When reviewing your student’s IEP or 504 plan, keep in mind that both these plans address needs related to school and preparing for life after high school. As your student goes through the grades, needs change. IEPs and 504 plans should change with the student. Some students might also no longer need services or a 504 plan.

If your student is not eligible for either a 504 plan or Special Education, you can disagree. Use your rights to resolve this. You could also agree with the findings and keep an eye on the situation. Sometimes emotional problems work themselves out. If problems get worse, you can always make another written request for an assessment. Be sure to state what is now different in the situation.

Emotional challenges in our children cause worry for parents. Finding support groups or others who lend you support helps us as parents, which in turn can help our children.

