Chapter 5 - Emotional Disturbance

Definition under IDEA of Emotional Disturbance

Under IDEA, an Emotional Disturbance (ED) is defined as:
a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and
to a marked degree that adversely affects a student's educational performance:
(a) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
(b) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and
teachers.
(c) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
(d) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
(e) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school
problems.
The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to students who are socially
maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance.

Overview of Emotional Disturbance

The term emotional disturbance is often used interchangeably with the terms emotional
disorder/problem, behavior disorder/disturbance, psychiatric illness, and mental illness/disorder.
An emotional disturbance refers to social, emotional or behavioral functioning that so departs
from generally accepted, age appropriate ethnic or cultural norms that it adversely affects a
student’s academic progress, social relationships, personal adjustment, classroom adjustment,
self-care or vocational skills.

According to the Tennessee Department of Education, “emotional disturbances are mental health
problems that severely disrupt a student’s or adolescent’s daily life and functioning at home, at
school or in the community. Tragically, an estimated two-thirds of the young people who need
mental health services are not getting them. Without help, these problems can lead to school
failure, alcohol and other drug abuse, family discord, violence or even suicide.”

The causes of emotional disturbance have not been adequately determined. Biology,
environment, or a mix of both can cause mental health problems in youth. Examples of
biological causes are genetics, chemical imbalances in the body and damage to the central
nervous system, such as head injury. There are many environmental factors that can put students
at risk of developing mental health problems. Examples include exposure to violence, stress
related chronic poverty, discrimination and other hardships or loss of important people in the
lives of the youth through death, divorce or broken relationships. Although various factors such
as heredity, brain disorder, diet, stress, and family functioning have been suggested as possible
causes, research has not shown any of these factors to be the direct cause of behavior or
emotional problems (Jensen).
Students with the most serious emotional disturbances may exhibit distorted thinking, excessive anxiety, bizarre motor acts, and abnormal mood swings. Some are identified as students who have a severe psychosis or schizophrenia (Jensen).

Many students who do not have emotional disturbances may display some of these same behaviors at various times during their development. However, when students have an emotional disturbance, these behaviors continue over long periods of time. Their behavior thus signals that they are not coping with their environment or peers (Turnbull et al.).

Possibly more than any other group of students with disabilities, students with emotional or behavior disorders present problems with social skills to themselves, their families, their peers, and their teachers (U.S. Department of Education; Gresham, Lane, MacMillian, & Bocian).

**Prevalence of Emotional Disturbance**

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Emotional Disturbance represents approximately 6.0 percent of all students having a classification in special education.

**Characteristics of Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders**

Characteristics often associated with students having emotional and or behavioral disorders include:

**An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.**

- physical or verbal aggression when others approach him or her
- lack of affect or disorganized/distorted emotions toward others
- demands for constant attention from others
- withdrawal from all social interactions

**Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances**

- limited or excessive self-control
- low frustration tolerance, emotional overreactions, and impulsivity
- limited premeditation or planning
- limited ability to predict consequences of behavior
- rapid changes in behavior or mood
- antisocial behaviors
- excessive dependence and over-closeness, and/or inappropriate rebellion and defiance; and low self-esteem and/or distorted self-concept.
A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression

- depressed or irritable mood most of the time (e.g., feeling sad, appearing tearful)
- diminished interest or pleasure in daily activities
- significant and unexpected changes in weight or appetite
- insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day
- fatigue or diminished energy nearly every day
- feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt
- diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day
- recurrent thoughts of death, or suicidal ideation.

Physical symptoms or fears associated with the student’s personal or school life. Examples of these characteristics include:

- headaches
- gastrointestinal problems
- cardiopulmonary symptoms
- incapacitating feelings of anxiety often accompanied by trembling, hyperventilating and/or dizziness
- panic attacks characterized by physical symptoms, for example, when an object, activity, individual or situation cannot be avoided or is confronted
- persistent and irrational fears of particular objects or situations
- intense fears or irrational thoughts related to separation from parent/guardian(s).

Other Characteristics of Students with ED

- a lack of understanding about consequences of actions
- problems with reasoning characterized by confused thoughts about and perceptions of social situations
- highly unusual and bizarre behaviors
- a lack of understanding or misinterpretations of social conventions and behavioral expectations
- excessive anxiety, pervasive depression, and/or excessive guilt.

Finally, it should be noted that an emotional disturbance exists only when the traits are considered to have been exhibited over a long period of time and to a marked degree. This means the characteristic(s) are persistent, generalized and extended over time and situations. The marked degree standard is met when the characteristic(s) are significantly deviant from expectations for age-level peers and have a low frequency occurrence in the peer group.
Procedures and Assessment Measures used to diagnose Emotional Disturbance

Each student shall have a multidisciplinary evaluation for the initial assessment of a suspected disability (Emotional Disturbance) that includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Comprehensive social history collected directly from the student’s parent/guardian/guardian, custodial guardian, or if necessary, from an individual with intimate knowledge of the student’s circumstances, history, or current behaviors. A comprehensive social assessment shall include family history, family-social interactions, developmental history, medical history (including mental health), and school history (including attendance and discipline records);
- Direct and anecdotal observations over time and across various settings by three or more licensed professionals;
- Documentation and assessment of how emotional disturbance adversely affects educational performance in the learning environment;
- Individual assessment of psycho-educational strengths and weaknesses, including intelligence, behavior, and personality factors, taking into account any exceptionality of the individual in the choice of assessment procedures;
- Individual educational assessment (criterion- or norm-referenced) including direct measures of classroom performance to determine the student’s strengths and weaknesses;
- Physical conditions ruled out as the primary cause of atypical behavior(s);
- Review of past educational performance;
- Specific behavioral data, including documentation of previous interventions and an evaluation of the locus of control of behavior to include internal and external factors;
- Visual or auditory deficits ruled out as the primary cause of atypical behavior(s);

Besides these assessment measures, the following should be considered:

If a student is suspected of having an Emotional Disturbance under the definition set forth in IDEA, the following assessment measures should also be considered:

- An observation by a team member other than the student’s general education teacher of the student’s academic performance in a general classroom setting; or in the case of a student less than school age or out of school, an observation by a team member conducted in an age-appropriate environment;
- A developmental history, if needed;
- An assessment of intellectual ability;
- Other assessments of the characteristics of speech and language impairments if the student exhibits impairments in any one or more of the following areas: cognition, fine motor, perceptual motor, communication, social or emotional, and perception or memory. These assessments shall be completed by specialists knowledgeable in the specific characteristics being assessed;
A review of cumulative records, previous individualized education programs or individualized family service plans and teacher collected work samples;

If deemed necessary, a medical statement or health assessment statement indicating whether there are any physical factors that may be affecting the student’s educational performance;

Assessments to determine the impact of the suspected disability:
  - On the student’s educational performance when the student is at the age of eligibility for kindergarten through age 21
  - On the student’s developmental progress when the student is age three through the age of eligibility for kindergarten

Additional evaluations or assessments necessary to identify the student’s educational needs.

Eligibility for a Diagnosis of an Emotional Disturbance

In order to be eligible for a classification as a student with an Emotional Disturbance under IDEA, the following standards should be met:

1. Determine whether the student exhibits one or more of the following (a-e):

   a. **An inability to learn at a rate commensurate with the student’s intellectual, sensory motor, and physical development**
   
   This characteristic requires documentation that a student is not able to learn, despite appropriate instructional strategies and/or support services. A comprehensive and differential assessment is performed to establish an “inability to learn.” The assessment should rule out any other primary reasons for the suspected disability, such as intellectual disability, speech and language disorders, autism, learning disability, hearing/vision impairment, multi-handicapping conditions, traumatic brain injury, neurological impairment or other medical conditions. If any of these other conditions is the primary cause, then the student may be deemed eligible for special education under that category of disability; OR

   b. **An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers**
   
   This characteristic requires documentation that the student is unable to initiate or to maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. Satisfactory interpersonal relationships include the ability to demonstrate sympathy, warmth and empathy toward others; establish and maintain friendships; be constructively assertive; and work and play independently. These abilities should be considered when observing the student’s interactions with both peers and teachers. This characteristic does not refer to the student who has conflict with only one teacher or with certain peers. Rather it is a pervasive inability to develop relationships with others across settings and situations; OR

   c. **Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances**
   
   This characteristic requires documentation that the student’s inappropriate behavior or feelings deviate significantly from expectations for the student’s age, gender and culture across different circumstances.
environments. The IEP Committee must determine whether the student’s inappropriate responses are occurring “under normal circumstances.” When considering “normal circumstances,” the IEP Committee should take into account whether a student’s home or school situation is disrupted by stress, recent changes, or unexpected events; OR

d.  A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
This characteristic requires documentation that the student’s unhappiness or depression is occurring across most, if not all, of the student’s life situations. The student must demonstrate a consistent pattern of depression or unhappiness in keeping with the criterion, “long period of time” (i.e., several months). In other words, this pattern is not a temporary response to situational factors or to a medical condition.

The characteristics should not be a secondary manifestation attributable to substance abuse, medication or a general medical condition (e.g., hypothyroidism). The characteristics cannot be the effect of normal bereavement; OR

e.  Physical symptoms or fears associated with the student’s personal or school life
Physical symptoms that qualify under the ED characteristic should adhere to the following four conditions:
  1.  symptoms suggesting physical disorders are present with no demonstrable medical findings;
  2.  positive evidence or strong presumption exists that these symptoms are linked to psychological factors/conflict;
  3.  the person is not conscious of intentionally producing the symptoms; and
  4.  the symptoms are not a culturally sanctioned response pattern.

2.  Determine whether the student’s educational performance is adversely affected
Indicators of educational performance include present and past grades, achievement test scores and measures of ongoing classroom performance (e.g., curriculum-based assessment and work samples). Adverse effect on educational performance implies a marked difference between the student’s academic performance and reasonable (not optimal) expectations of performance. The appropriateness of the school district’s educational goals, as reflected in the curriculum and in the formal grading report, should be considered in determining whether the student’s performance meets reasonable expectations.

3.  Determine that the student does NOT meet the criteria for a “socially maladjusted” student
A social maladjustment is a persistent pattern of violating societal norms, such as multiple acts of truancy, or substance or sex abuse, and is marked by struggle with authority, low frustration threshold, impulsivity, or manipulative behaviors. A social maladjustment unaccompanied by an emotional disturbance is often indicated by some or all of the following:

- Unhappiness or depression that is not pervasive
- Problem behaviors that are goal-directed, self-serving and manipulative
- Actions that are based on perceived self-interest even though others may consider the behavior to be self-defeating
- General social conventions and behavioral standards are understood, but are not accepted
- Negative counter-cultural standards or peers are accepted and followed
- Problem behaviors have escalated during pre-adolescence or adolescence
- Inappropriate behaviors are displayed in selected settings or situations (e.g., only at home, in school or in selected classes), while other behavior is appropriately controlled; and/or
- Problem behaviors are frequently the result of encouragement by a peer group, are intentional, and the student understands the consequences of such behaviors.

**Final Thoughts**

Assessment information collected or generated during the eligibility determination phase should contribute to developing the plan that eventually becomes the Individualized Education Program. These assessments by the multidisciplinary evaluation team should yield a profile of the student’s needs and strengths as well as the student’s characteristic pattern of response to environmental and internal influences. Assessment for serious emotional disturbance will include not only information about the student’s aptitude and academic achievement levels, but also information regarding (1) social and personal competence needed to maximize independence and (2) when appropriate, the student’s vocational aptitudes and interests. Social and personal information should lead to the identification of affective skills to be targeted in the IEP. Examples include (1) managing anger, frustration and other emotions that tend to exacerbate conflict with peers, teachers and school administrators, and (2) coping effectively with withdrawal or depression.

The IEP Committee may not identify or refuse to identify a student as a student with an emotional behavioral disability solely on the basis that the student has another disability, or is socially maladjusted, adjudged delinquent, a dropout, chemically dependent, or a student whose behavior is primarily due to cultural deprivation, familial instability, suspected student abuse or socio-economic circumstances, or when medical or psychiatric diagnostic statements have been used to describe the student’s behavior.