

Tips for Teachers, Principals and School Support Staff from Students with Mental Health and Behavioral Disabilities

Youth with mental health and behavioral disabilities are often sensitive about their disabilities and may be uncomfortable talking directly to school professionals about the challenges they face. Members of the youth advisory board of PACER Center, however, have developed the following ideas to share with school staff.

Please treat me with respect:

- I learn more by what you do than what you say. Please model the attitude and behavior you would like me to imitate. When I hear positive things about myself and feel respected, I treat others the same way. I learn from positive examples of how to be patient and resolve conflicts.
- Your encouragement builds me up. Unwarranted criticism and harsh words can hurt and affect me. When I lack self-esteem, it is easy for me to believe others' negative remarks about me—even if they are untrue.
- Privacy is important to me. I feel embarrassed if someone points out my disability and need for special accommodations or medication in front of my peers, and I worry that an adult will ask, "Did you take your medication today?" when I'm with other students.
- If I receive special education services, it is because qualified professionals, through evaluation, have determined that I am eligible for them. Please consider data and documentation, rather than personal opinion, as we develop my Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Please take to time to know me:

- Please keep an open mind, as we become acquainted. Sometimes statements in records or others' opinions are based on the past, and they may not accurately portray who I am now. Everyone needs a second chance; help me to develop a positive image.

- Please tell me what you like about me and what you see me doing correctly. I am already very aware of my faults and of what I do wrong.
- If there is an incident in school, please listen to me. Let me tell my story before making a judgment.
- Try to understand my mental health disabilities. Learning about my disability through training or other resources will equip you to assist me with empathy if I encounter challenges.
- The medications I take may cause side effects like dizziness, sleepiness, or needing to use the bathroom more frequently. I appreciate your understanding as I deal with the issues.
- Sometimes my disability makes me feel like I am out of control. I probably need structure, but please allow me some choices or participation in making decisions.
- Usually I am not trying to misbehave. Sometimes I have simply not learned the right way to handle things. My mental health disorder can have an impact on how my brain works, and I may have difficulty controlling my thoughts, emotions or actions. I need to learn behavioral skills, much as I learn math. With your help, I want to improve things!

Please help me feel safe:

- Advocate for me at school. I really need an adult at school who will support me and look out for my best interests.
- If I come to you and say that I am being teased, bullied, or harassed, please help me.
- You have the influence to provide a positive school environment among students and school staff. Two suggestions: Discourage gossip about individual students and respect their confidential information.

Please help me learn:

- Remember that I DO want to learn, feel successful, and be liked by others. Sometimes my disability and resulting lack of skills interfere.
- The accommodations on my IEP or Section 504 plan affect us both. Together with my positive behavior intervention plan (if I have one), they are designed to help us succeed together.
- I usually learn more through positive instruction than through punishment. I know there are consequences for my actions, but please teach me how to replace unacceptable behavior with what is appropriate.
- Work with me to create learning or coping strategies. Include me in developing interventions.

Please know that I appreciate your efforts:

One teacher's positive impact can help move my life in the right direction. I hope you will be that teacher. Thank you for your willingness to grow as a professional and for taking the time to help me learn.

The Youth Advisory Board is comprised of 8-10 youth between the ages of 13-18 with mental health needs. They have regular meetings, an annual retreat, maintain a website, and are available to give presentations at workshops, in-services and conferences. Please contact PACER for more information.