

What Probation Officers Need to Know about Learning Disabilities

As a probation officer, you might be called upon by the school when your clients break school rules. As you look at behaviors such as skipping class or school, disrespectful talk, or negative attitudes, it may be helpful to keep in mind that such behaviors frequently stem from learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities often feel frustrated in class and struggle to understand the material. Behaviors resulting in suspension or expulsion can be a student's way of escaping school.

Understanding the Connection

Learning disabilities can have a direct correlation to juvenile justice issues. By understanding this relationship, you can more accurately assess the situation and respond appropriately. Here are some research findings:

- Youth in the juvenile justice population have twice the rate of learning disabilities as youth in the general population. In many cases, the learning disabilities are undiagnosed.
- Undiagnosed learning disabilities often contribute to frustration, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, school failure, and dropping out.
- Youth with learning disabilities often skip school or are consistently late.
- If behaviors escalate, youth may be placed in more restrictive settings while their underlying learning problems remain unaddressed.
- Youth with a combination of disruptive behaviors and learning disabilities have the highest rates of offending and of recidivism.
- Learning disabilities may affect a youth's ability to comply with instructions. He or she might not be able to understand, read, or follow a sequence of simple directions. When this happens, students may be labeled as being defiant, oppositional, or lazy.

If a student is not receiving the interventions and supports necessary to participate fully in school, he or she has a greater likelihood of acting inappropriately and breaking rules.

Working with Schools

When a school reports that a student's behavior is a violation of probation, here are some questions to ask in order to determine if the behavior might be linked to a learning disability:

- Does the youth have a documented learning disability?
- Is there a current Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan?
- If there is not an IEP, has he or she ever been evaluated for special education services?
- Are the student's reading and comprehension at grade level?
- Does the student consistently "miss" instructions or have difficulty explaining what he or she has learned?
- Are the student's grades inconsistent?
- Does the student refuse to read aloud in class or complete written assignments?

Knowing the answers may help you make a better determination as to whether the behavior is a response to legitimate educational needs or a probation violation.

Types of Learning Disabilities

There are many types of learning disabilities. By understanding how some of the more common types affect a youth's ability to behave in school, you can better decide whether the behavior supports a determination of a probation violation.

Reading Disability

Students with this disability typically have difficulty with:

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- Spelling, writing, and pronouncing words
 - Word recognition and comprehension
 - Reading quickly and having legible handwriting
 - Understanding, remembering, and describing concepts and the order of events
 - Understanding the meaning of what is being said to them

Written Language Disability

Students with this disability typically have difficulty with:

- Planning, developing, and organizing written materials, reports, essays
- Grammar, punctuation, and spelling
- Writing legibly
- Completing or turning in work

Language Disorder

Students with this disability typically have difficulty with:

- Expressing their vocabulary or thoughts
- Taking notes from lessons, using words properly
- Using information and repeating it verbally

Nonverbal Learning Disability

Students with this often unrecognized disability typically have difficulty with:

- Reading social cues, body language, or other nonverbal messages
- Conceptualizing and defining the issues
- Being concrete in their understanding of situations and properly interpreting communication by peers and adults
- Being seen as lazy, defiant, or annoying

Math Disorder

Students with this disability typically have difficulty with:

- Recognizing and reading number symbols and grouping numbers
- Understanding math concepts
- Following sequence in math steps
- Having a sense of direction
- Having long-term memory of math concepts

When a student is determined through evaluation to be eligible for educational services under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, students may receive specific accommodations and interventions. Information about these accommodations can be found on PACER's Web site at PACER.org.

Appropriate services to address a student's individual learning needs are determined by parents and the school IEP team and will be included in a youth's IEP or Section 504 plan.

If there appear to be unaddressed learning problems, you might want to suggest a school evaluation. Under federal law, schools are obligated to identify students with disabilities including learning disabilities. This provision is called "child find."

Necessary accommodations and modifications that address a student's individual learning style are determined by the IEP team and should be included in a youth's IEP or Section 504 plan.

Conclusion

As a probation officer, you have the responsibility to ensure that your clients comply with orders of the court. In addition, when investigating possible violations, it may be helpful to advise the parent, guardian, or other individual responsible for the youth to contact PACER for assistance in accessing educational services for their child. This information may help parents advocate more effectively for their child and hopefully, improve the youth's chances for achieving success in school.

For more detailed information on any of the topics in this handout, please contact Lili Garfinkel at lgarfinkel@PACER.org or check donline.org, nclid.org, or chadd.org.

References

Leone, P., and Garfinkel, L. (May 28, 2003) National Center on Secondary Education Transition (NCSET). Transcript on Conference.