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# Identifying and Assessing Students with Emotional Disturbance

by

**Terry J. Tibbetts, Ph.D., J.D.**  
San Bernardino, California

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## About the Author



**Terry J. Tibbetts, Ph.D., J.D.**, is a licensed psychologist and educational attorney who has worked in a variety of clinical and educational settings involving students with emotional disturbance, both as an administrator and as a psychologist. He currently works for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, where he is responsible for the psychoeducational evaluation of adjudicated adolescents. Dr. Tibbetts also holds a master's degree in clinical social work and is both a registered art therapist and a board-certified behavior analyst. His most recent publication is on the use of short-term gestalt art therapy with adolescents who are emotionally disturbed. Dr. Tibbetts has testified as an independent evaluator and as an expert witness in multiple administrative due process hearings regarding the appropriate identification, assessment, and treatment of students with emotional disturbance. He resides in Southern California with his wife and two children.

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## Placement Characteristics

The IEP team determines the most appropriate educational program for the student once identification and assessment have been completed and the student is found to be emotionally disturbed. Although the focus of the book has been on identification and assessment, this chapter provides a brief summary of typical educational settings for students who are emotionally disturbed, necessary staffing parameters and skills, successful classroom characteristics, and appropriate program characteristics for effective ED placements.

### EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS AND SERVICES

Because no single program or service may be effective for every student who is emotionally disturbed, federal law requires that a “continuum of services” and programs must be considered for the student, with an emphasis on providing such services and programs within the LRE. This continuum is based on the individual needs of the student, and the services vary in the level and extent of the interventions provided to the student. A comprehensive and appropriate educational placement can be determined through matching the student’s characteristics and needs with various programs and services. RiSE (1991) defined these placements as either integrated settings or protective settings.

#### Integrated Settings

The special education teacher and the general education teacher work together in integrated settings to educate the student who is emotionally disturbed. The

general education teacher typically provides most of the instructional services, whereas the special education teacher may provide instructional services and/or service in a support role to the general education teacher. These programs are typically provided at the student's home school site. All staff working in integrated settings should have extensive and specialized training in effective collaboration and in the educational needs of the student who is emotionally disturbed.

**General Education Classroom** Many students who are emotionally disturbed can be educated within a general education classroom setting with appropriate educational supports or related services such as counselors, specialized academic instruction (SAI) specialists, and other designated instructional services (DIS) support staff. Using support staff allows the student to be educated within the LRE while reserving more restrictive resources for students who have more severe disabilities. Support staff can include a trained instructional aide assigned to assist the student in academic or behavioral activities. SAI services may occur within or outside the general education classroom.

**Part-Day General Education Classroom** The student who is emotionally disturbed is placed into a smaller and more intensive classroom setting for a part of the day. This smaller classroom setting is often referred to as a learning center, a resource room, or a specialized instructional classroom. Although the student continues to participate in the general education classroom to the maximum extent appropriate as determined by the IEP team, the student also receives services from the SAI specialist within the more individualized classroom setting. The emphasis is on moving the student who is emotionally disturbed to extended participation in the general education classroom as the student's behavioral, social, and academic goals are increasingly met.

### Protective Settings

Protective settings are considered when the student who is emotionally disturbed appears to need more intensive and extended services that require additional district staff support. These settings may be provided at a district school site, a segregated separate school site, a mental health site, a nonpublic school (NPS), or within a residential or hospital setting. The SAI specialist maintains the primary responsibility for the educational program within these settings.

Advantages to such settings include the opportunity for greater individualization in instructional content, flexibility in the educational format, increased consistency within the classroom environment, and a smaller classroom population, which allows for a higher level of individualized attention and support. Disadvantages include reduced access to peers without disabilities and an increased exposure to students with severely disturbed behavior. All staff working in protective settings should have extensive and specialized training in the educational needs of the student who is emotionally disturbed.

**Special Day Class** A protective setting such as an SDC may be required when students fail to demonstrate progress in the general education classroom, even with supportive services from special education staff. For students with ED, these typically are students whose behavior is so significantly disruptive to the class or

dangerous to themselves or others that a self-contained educational placement is necessary. Such a class placement is designed to create a more controlled, therapeutic environment. The classes are generally smaller, typically 8–12 students with a teacher and 2 classroom aides. This allows each student to receive more consistent individualized and intensive instruction. The class often is focused on social and behavioral gains as well as academic improvement. The program is designed to prepare students to return to a more collaborative setting.

A relatively new format involves collaborative agreements between the NPS site and local school districts, in which dedicated classrooms within a school site are leased or otherwise provided to the NPS. Students who would otherwise be placed into a segregated NPS site are provided with the more intensive services of an NPS but served within the school site itself. This arrangement allows students to participate in social, academic, and recreational activities with peers without disabilities while providing focused services to students who are emotionally disturbed in a format that facilitates transition back to district programs.

***Special Day Class: Day Treatment*** The behavioral and emotional severity of many students who are emotionally disturbed requires a coordinated response from both mental health and educational systems. Some of these students are placed in an SDC that incorporates mental health treatment as an embedded part of the day. Many of these programs are provided at a segregated district site, but they may also be provided at a district site, an NPS site, or a local mental health facility. Such a program generally consists of at least three program aspects: academic programs with individualized educational therapies, individual and group psychotherapy, and family-related therapy and/or other interventions (Sabatino & Altizer, 1998).

The student typically participates in specialized instructional and clinical activities throughout the day. Structured instructional time provided by SAI staff is interspersed with individual and group psychotherapy activities managed by mental health staff. The focus is on providing a safe and therapeutic environment while maintaining a core educational program for the students. All-day treatment programs generally require a minimum of 3 hours per day of therapeutic activities. The programs also provide an opportunity for collaboration and teamwork between educational and clinical staff because the student is monitored and observed by all staff across the entire day. Immediate problem-solving strategies as well as long-term planning can be developed within an ongoing team format.

Because the focus of intervention is on behavioral and emotional needs as well as academic needs, many programs have less opportunity and time to provide access to the core curriculum for students. Shepherd (2010) pointed out that this may lead to difficulties in making the transition back to a general education classroom setting when the student returns from the day treatment program.

***Nonpublic School*** An NPS placement at a segregated site may be considered for students who are emotionally disturbed and who require a more restrictive setting. All NPS students are special education students who have been placed at the NPS program due to the severity and intensity of their emotional and behavior difficulties. The instructional program typically involves a full-day classroom setting, with students transported to and from their homes each day.

An NPS program rarely has a day treatment component. Support staff are generally well trained in working with students who are emotionally disturbed, however,

and are available to a larger extent than in regular district classroom settings. Many NPS sites have a strong clinical component, and mental health activities are built into the educational day. The classrooms often have a low student–teacher ratio and offer fewer distractions. NPS teachers are often able to respond more appropriately to bizarre or serious problems (e.g., physical aggression, sexual acting out, self-mutilation) that such students may demonstrate because of their experience with students who are emotionally disturbed.

The cost to school districts is the major disadvantage of an NPS. Although some NPS programs are nonprofit, all NPS programs depend on keeping a sufficient number of enrolled students in order to financially survive. Many districts mistrust NPS recommendations regarding a student's need for continued treatment and education in the program and may believe these recommendations lack validity. The most successful NPS programs are those that are able to create a sense of teamwork and collaboration with referring school districts so that both district and NPS staff recognize that they are working together for the best interests of the student who is emotionally disturbed.

**Residential** Residential placement may be considered when the intensity and severity of the student's ED becomes so disabling that the student is unable to benefit from a public educational setting or the less restrictive settings previously described. The student who is emotionally disturbed typically lives on or next to the campus of a school site and receives educational services from teachers, along with individual, living unit, and group therapy from trained counselors, psychologists, social workers, and/or psychiatrists. In addition, specially trained counselors often referred to as cottage staff or house parents work with the student on social and independent functional skills (living skills). A comprehensive treatment program is developed for each student and is monitored by the educational, therapeutic, and residential staff team during periodic meetings. The emphasis is on stabilizing the emotional health of the student and returning him or her to the local district as soon as appropriate. The typical length of stay for a student who is emotionally disturbed in a residential facility varies but is generally in the range of 18–24 months.

**Institutionalization** The student is placed in a correctional facility or mental hospital and receives an educational program in conjunction with other institutional services. Hospital institutions may include private psychiatric hospitals and medical hospitals with psychiatric units, private community psychiatric hospitals with a local mental health contract, university psychiatric hospitals, or county hospitals with psychiatric units. Many hospital placements generally last less than 30 days, because of health insurance issues (RiSE, 1991).

Juvenile justice correctional institutions serve students who have been committed by the courts for violating the law. The length of incarceration varies, depending on court adjudication. State law generally mandates how educational services for such students will be provided.

### Related Services

A special education student may also receive supportive related services (referred to in the law as designated instructional services [DIS]) as a supplement to the protective and collaborative education setting previously described. These services are determined by the IEP team and may include speech-language therapy,

occupational therapy, adaptive physical education, or even career development (vocational counseling) services. Counseling is the most common DIS service for students who are emotionally disturbed.

**Speech-Language Therapy** Students who are emotionally disturbed often demonstrate a variety of communication difficulties and impairments (see Chapter 5). Speech-language services can be a highly effective part of the student's IEP.

**Occupational Therapy/Adaptive Physical Education** Services provided by an occupational therapist or through adaptive physical education can significantly benefit students who demonstrate difficulties in physical movement or motor coordination by building visual-motor, coordination, motor planning, and fine and gross motor skills. Improvement in these areas can increase the student's ability to successfully engage in physical and motor activities with peers and peer groups.

**Career Development** A comprehensive career development program for secondary students who are emotionally disturbed is an important but often overlooked part of their educational program because more than half of all students who are emotionally disturbed drop out of school before graduation and an even higher number are unemployed up to 5 years after school ends. The teacher should be familiar with and work closely with regional occupational programs as well as with state agencies such as the Department of Rehabilitation and Employment Development Department to ensure that students who are emotionally disturbed are provided with a meaningful opportunity to develop the skills to successfully make a transition from high school graduation to gainful employment.

The lack of occupational social skills has been estimated to be the cause of almost 90% of job loss for students with disabilities (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2001). While there are many classroom-based social skills training programs available, none address their relationship to obtaining and keeping specific employment. Accordingly, secondary student IEP documents should address the issue of employment-related social skills training as an integral part of career development.

The school psychologist and counselor are a useful starting point for career development services because they can administer vocational interest and social skills inventories to the student. The results can provide IEP goals that can lead to specific activities that will increase the student's ability to 1) learn more about possible career options and 2) how to obtain and keep jobs that will further his or her career. These goals and activities can be documented on the student's individual transition plan and used to monitor the student's progress in this area.

**Individual Counseling** Individual or small-group counseling is the most common supportive service provided to students who are emotionally disturbed. Federal law appears to generically refer to both psychotherapy and counseling as counseling; however, there is a significant difference between the two.

Educational interventions to student's emotional needs generally involve counseling, and most graduate educational programs in pupil personnel services teach skills in this area. Counseling is essentially concerned with the healthy personality and its conscious, rational aspects, and helping students make productive life choices. It assists the student in working through specific, identified problems in sessions that generally last from a few weeks to several months.



By contrast, most clinical interventions use psychotherapy. Psychotherapy deals with the abnormal personality and its irrational aspects and with assisting students in resolving deep-seated, often unconscious emotional conflicts. Resolving such personality problems usually requires a significantly long period of time because the student requires time and repetitive working through of the conflicts in order to constructively resolve them.

### **Lions and Lambs**

It is an unfortunate reality that the assessment process in many cases may be circumvented by teachers and administrators who want students with behavior problems removed from the general education settings (RiSE, 1991). This places pressure on the IEP team to find students who are socially maladjusted or behaviorally disruptive as eligible for special education and often results in their subsequent, and inappropriate, placement in an ED classroom setting.

Placing students who are socially maladjusted with students who are emotionally disturbed (referred to by many administrators as “placing the lions with the lambs”) does nothing but significantly dilute the effectiveness of the ED setting for both groups of students (Moran, 2012). The purposeful misbehavior of students who are socially maladjusted (e.g., physical and verbal aggression, classroom disruption, refusal to accept teacher authority) has little in common with students who are emotionally disturbed and whose disorder is rarely antisocial in nature. It provides students who are socially maladjusted with an opportunity to exploit and victimize students who are emotionally disturbed (Gacono & Hughes, 2004) while reducing their quality of education, violating their right to learn in a safe and protected environment, and providing them with inappropriate peer models. Not surprisingly, teachers and aides in ED classrooms are more likely to leave their positions or seek reassignment (Brooks & Farley, 1998).

It is critical for the evaluator to participate in the IEP process to ensure that the IEP team does not make inappropriate or rushed judgments in what is often a very complex decision-making process. The evaluator should be a supportive and informational resource to the team in determining the most appropriate general education services and program modifications for noneligible students.

**Entry Review Team** Many school districts with ED classrooms and site programs utilize a more formalized identification and entry process to ensure that students who are socially maladjusted are not inappropriately placed in an ED classroom and that all placements are educationally sound and appropriate for each individual student. This approach typically utilizes a committee or team that reviews the complete file for each student proposed for the ED program to ensure that an appropriate and meaningful educational program for that student can be provided. Coats (2006) identified five factors that such teams should look at in their review of each student being considered.

1. LRE: What other treatment options or interventions have been attempted to this point? Have all other less restrictive options been exhausted?
2. Safety concerns: Does the student present a significant danger to self or others? Is the student actively suicidal or homicidal?

3. Support from all systems: What level of cooperation and support can be expected from the referring school district? What level of cooperation and support can be expected from the parents? Is there congruence of goals involving all parties?
4. Goodness of fit: Is there space available in the program? How will the student respond to the current classroom dynamics and milieu?
5. Staffing: Will there be appropriate staffing to meet the student's needs and to ensure that the recommended educational services can be effectively provided?

If the team is unable to answer these questions in a positive and confident way, then the placement of the student in the ED program should be declined.

## STAFFING CHARACTERISTICS AND SKILLS

Staffing characteristics and skills play a key role in the development of an effective ED classroom program. These can affect dynamics ranging from classroom management style and levels of student involvement and motivation to frequency of student misbehavior and time on academic tasks.

### Classroom Size

Class size should be limited to 8–12 students and three supervising adults to give students more individualized attention and maintain effective classroom instruction in crisis situations. All adult staff should have extensive training in effectively working with students who are emotionally disturbed (Mosier & Park, 1979).

### Staffing Characteristics

Assisting students in learning to substitute socially appropriate behaviors and attitudes for those that have resulted in their exclusion from the general education setting is the main task of adults in the ED classroom. The task of teaching such self-regulatory behaviors to students who are emotionally disturbed requires a high level and variety of skills.

**Direct Instructional Staff** As the lead instructional staff member, the teacher should have a demonstrated skill level and background in

- Clinical and educational models of ED
- Assessment and curriculum design in academic and social skill development
- Crisis prevention and deescalation of verbal and physical aggression
- Classroom organization, ecological intervention, and group management
- Individual and group behavior management skills
- Ability to utilize multiple instructional strategies
- Approaches to effective inclusion, including collaboration skills with other teachers

- Developing and implementing behavioral goals and strategies
- Keeping records and behavioral logs

Although the teacher is the lead instructional staff member in the ED program, all classroom staff must also be highly trained and capable. Perhaps no other special eligibility classification requires as high a level of staff skills and abilities as ED. All adult staff must be firm but fair, and flexibility and originality are key components in effectiveness. Adults must be able to recognize each student's unique strengths and weaknesses as well as their reactions to environmental stress and other factors. They must understand the context within which specific problems occur and respond to such problems in ways that lead to appropriate interventions.

Each adult must also be thoroughly familiar with all classroom routines and procedures. Each adult should also know every student's academic level, behavioral tendencies, and current achievement status in relation to IEP goals. This provides consistency in working with the class and with each student and provides for efficient continuation of the classroom program without interruption if any adult is unavoidably absent on any given day.

Working with students who are emotionally disturbed in the classroom setting can often cause adults to become angry or frustrated. Shores (2009) noted that it is often easy for adults to become frustrated and lose sight of the fact that the student's behaviors are the result of significant emotional issues. It is critical to focus on the student's behavior rather than making value judgments about the student. Letting students know that adults care for them and support them even when they may not approve of their behavior is one of the most important tasks of adults in the ED classroom (Shores, 2009).

**Administrative Support** Administrators and support staff must possess the expertise and resources necessary to assist teachers to effectively teach students who are emotionally disturbed, including both fiscal and staff development resources. Administrators need to carefully monitor the strengths and weaknesses of school staff working with students who are emotionally disturbed to ensure that they have the skills and abilities to effectively work with such students.

Administrators must be highly visible in working as resources for ED programs. The tremendous shortage of trained teachers and support personnel and the lack of appropriate personnel development activities and standards for training ED teachers make it extremely difficult to assemble and maintain a team of educational professionals with sufficient training (RiSE, 1991). Accordingly, it is critical that administrators are consistently available to staff for support and guidance.

Furthermore, administrators must closely work with program staff to ensure that students who are primarily socially maladjusted are not placed into a classroom program with students who are primarily emotionally disturbed. A related concern is managing ED classrooms containing students with externalizing disorders and students with internalizing disorders. One school district addressed this issue by developing two classroom programs—one focused on addressing inappropriate behaviors (externalizing) and one focused on academics and social support (internalizing). This homogenous grouping was highly effective in developing differentiated academic, social, and behavioral strategies for the students in each class.

### Individualized Education Program Goal and Objectives

Writing effective goals and objectives for each student is another key domain for the ED teacher. Students who are emotionally disturbed are placed in special education programs because of their emotional or behavioral impairments, which need to be addressed when developing IEP goals. In addition to academics, the teacher should develop goals for behavioral, social, and emotional development as curriculum areas.

- Social skills development and maintenance is almost always a key impairment area for students who are emotionally disturbed. Excellent structured and low-cost social skills curricula are available for classroom use (e.g., McGinnis, 2011; RiSE, 1991). Stephens (1992) has a set of social skills tasks that utilizes an IEP goals format.
- Goals should also include prevocational skills that will improve the student's ability to increase study and work skills (e.g., following directions, completing tasks on time).
- Goals in academic instruction should reflect the state core standards curriculum as modified for the student's level of performance.
- Students who are English language learners must have an English as a second language goal in their IEPs.
- Goals should also include transitional activities that would increase students' ability to move into a less restrictive educational environment.

If physical intervention in a crisis situation with the student is to be used, then this should also be noted on the IEP, as well as a reference to the school policy regarding notification of law enforcement personnel if criminal actions are taken by the student while in the school setting.

### Managing Crisis Situations

The ability to effectively manage crisis situations in the classroom setting is another critical characteristic for the effective ED teacher. Several national organizations provide formal training to teachers in this area, all of which focus on using nonverbal and verbal skills to deescalate a crisis event, physical principles of safety to avoid student and staff injury when behavior escalates to a physical level, and subsequent resolution of the issues leading to the crisis situation (Caraulia & Steiger, 1997). No teacher should ever be requested to or ever should physically intervene with students without previous formal training in this area. Furthermore, every school should have a written policy regarding using physical intervention with students who are out of control and who require physical holding or escorting. Key areas of effective training in crisis management should include, at minimum

- Utilizing verbal techniques effective in approaching and reducing the tension of an agitated student

- Implementing techniques effective for staff to control their own anxiety and maintain a positive professional attitude
- Understanding how staff responses may escalate or deescalate a crisis situation
- Ensuring the safety of all staff and students throughout the crisis situation
- Maintaining a consistent and ongoing therapeutic situation, even during violent moments

All staff working in an ED program should have had formal training in this area before placement in an ED classroom setting, and regular staff review of this training should be a key agency requirement. Teachers who do not know what to do or how to appropriately respond when a situation escalates into a crisis are a danger to their fellow teachers, their students, and themselves (Smith, 2006).

Almost all formal training programs emphasize a similar set of key strategies for teachers who are confronted with a crisis situation with an aggressive student. Johns and Carr (1995) noted several of these:

- Always remain calm: When a teacher becomes tense or upset, students may view this as a loss of self-control by the teacher and respond by becoming even more agitated.
- Lower the voice and speak slowly: Keeping the teacher's voice deliberately low will often help calm the student. In addition, when a student is upset, it may take him or her longer than usual to process what the teacher is saying.
- Give the student space: When a student becomes angry, it is important to allow the student to feel that his or her personal space is not being violated, which may increase agitation and the chances of physical aggression.
- Be aware of your body stance: A face-to-face format may be taken as confrontational and aggressive, increasing the chances of escalation. It is better to stand at an angle and to the side of a student.
- Dress in a manner that reduces risk of injury: Female teachers should avoid wearing long earrings, necklaces, large scarves or shawls, or anything else that can be used by a student to grab and hold them (e.g., ponytails). Male teachers should avoid wearing neckties.
- Remind students of the consequences for their behavior and set limits: Students should receive a warning of the consequences of continuing the inappropriate behavior as well as a reminder of the reinforcing consequences for engaging in alternate positive behaviors. Provide the choice for the student, and wait for him or her to make the choice. The teacher should thank the student for making the positive choice.
- Ignore irrelevant comments: Redirect the student back to the problem and refrain from being drawn into arguments that take the discussion off track.
- After resolution, discuss the incident with the student: Use the incident as an opportunity to teach alternative, appropriate ways to deal with aggression.

Finally, it is important to keep comprehensive and thorough records of any crisis incidents involving physical intervention. Smith and Yell (2013) emphasize that documentation is important for three reasons: 1) to protect staff members if liability issues arise, 2) to ensure there is a record in case any false allegations are made by the involved student(s), and 3) to provide informational data to program administrators and staff in evaluating the appropriateness of their responses to the incident.

Some programs require that staff wear latex gloves if there is any potential for physical intervention in order to minimize any transfer risk of blood-borne pathogens. It is interesting to note that one school program reported students who had been acting aggressively would become compliant when staff put on gloves in preparation for intervention. The program staff suggested that many students did not want to be touched by adults wearing latex gloves (Garrison School Staff, 1994). It may also have reflected the awareness of students that the donning of latex gloves was a discriminative stimulus indicating physical contact was about to occur if any further aggressive behavior was demonstrated.

### Law Enforcement Intervention

Call the police if there is a crisis situation that involves assault or battery of another individual by the student who is emotionally disturbed. Law enforcement officers should be notified when there is any serious physical aggression committed by a student who is emotionally disturbed. Administrators who do not recognize criminal acts committed in the school do a major disservice to students and the community (Johns & Carr, 1995). Furthermore, they fail to ensure that the school site remains a safe environment for all students.

## PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

A well-designed educational program should be structured, organized, predictable, and orderly (Epanchin, 1991). Many ED classrooms and settings, however, are poorly designed for students who are emotionally disturbed and often include unstructured or overstimulating activities, lack of clearly delineated transition times, inconsistent use of rewards or punishments, frustrating or boring academic tasks, overly competitive games or tasks, unpredictable teacher behaviors or comments, unclear expectations, or poorly structured class time.

An effective program for students who are emotionally disturbed must reflect a recognition that the teacher is concerned with each student's mental health and emotional well-being, his or her academic achievement and success, and the welfare of the classroom, including the integrity of the environment and ongoing maintenance of appropriate and supportive procedures and activities in that environment. This means that an effective ED classroom must 1) provide a safe and secure environment in which learning can take place, 2) provide ongoing opportunities for students to learn how to follow rules and the consequences for choosing not to follow them, and 3) assist students in learning how to manage their behaviors by developing self-discipline and self-control skills (Shepherd, 2010).

Frisby (1990) identified a problem-solving model of effective classroom discipline focusing on the ability of the teacher to demonstrate a thorough knowledge of four subsystems: instructional, behavioral, group management and dynamics, and human relationships.

## Instructional

The effective ED teacher engages students in instruction by different learning modalities, appealing to differing interests, and using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity, ensuring that students compete only against themselves while cooperatively learning with other students (Tomlinson, 1999).

The curriculum content must be provided to students who are emotionally disturbed in a manner that is individualized and keeps motivation strong while still maintaining high academic standards. The teacher must clearly understand the curriculum content that the student must eventually learn in order to return to the general education setting. More elaborate and lengthy units of study will probably be relatively less effective because the course of instruction can be disrupted by behavioral outbursts, inconsistent attendance, and frequency of students entering and exiting the program. Coats (2006) recommended that the teacher consider using a shorter unit format with units clearly connected to each other as part of a more cohesive curriculum, accompanied by a clear set of expected student outcomes.

Written assignments must be initially adapted to the student's level of frustration tolerance. Many students who are emotionally disturbed will look at an assignment and refuse to attempt it if it appears to be more than they believe they can do. Individual worksheets may need to have fewer problems; be printed in a larger font; or have critical words, operations, or functions color coded or otherwise emphasized. The student can be shifted to independent practice once his or her initial competency is established. Review of previously mastered material should also be built into each student's assignments to ensure long-term mastery and a sense of accomplishment through a high percentage of correct responses.

Specific lesson plans need to be planned and developed in advance and focused to ensure that all assignments and activities support coverage of the core curriculum while corresponding to the student's IEP goals and objectives. Lesson plans should include additional and/or alternative activities because lessons may often be completed more quickly than anticipated or may be refused by students. Attempting to force students to complete an activity that is not working only creates open resistance and may result in escalating student defiance. The teacher needs to be sensitive to student frustration or boredom levels so that another activity can be quickly substituted.

Furthermore, careful attention must be given to the amount of new information being presented at any given time. Directions should be clear and presented with appropriate vocabulary, and concrete or specific examples should be used whenever possible to introduce new concepts. The student should repeat the directions back to the teacher. A wide variety of specific curriculum approaches can be used that focus on the essential concepts and skills to be taught to each individual student.

- **Learning centers:** Classroom areas are designed to teach, reinforce, or extend a particular skill or concept. Materials and instructions for different activities are provided, and students can work independently or in small groups to complete assignments or activities. Activities can easily be tiered so that all students focus on essential understandings and skills but at different levels of complexity or abstraction. Learning centers can be used for additional skill practice, enrichment, or as an alternative when a class activity is not going well.

- **Stations:** Provide different locations in the classroom where students simultaneously work on various tasks (Tomlinson, 1999). Students rotate from station to station based on their instructional needs and the tasks that the teacher has developed for that particular station.
- **Tiered activities:** The teacher differentiates the level of difficulty by adjusting the levels of reading or questioning as well as varying the complexity of assignments and the specific final product that is required (Ventriglia, 2009).
- **Using alternative intelligences (Gardner, 1999):** Students work together to create a group project, with each student contributing to the total product based on his or her cognitive strengths. For example, if the group is working on “A Soldier’s Life in the Civil War,” then students who are verbally oriented might write the formal group report; an artistic nonreader might illustrate the report; a student who has good sensorimotor skills might be asked to make a replica of a typical soldier’s tent or uniform, whereas a musical student might be asked to identify and/or perform some typical songs sung by soldiers on both sides of the conflict.
- **Sequential tutoring:** Provide individual tutoring within a group. Students are given individualized seat work, and teachers tutor individual students as they work, rotating from student to student, giving assistance as needed. A variation may involve students taking their work to the teacher.
- **Peer and/or cross-age tutoring:** Students are trained and supervised by the teacher to assist younger students or classmates.
- **Contracting:** Specific written agreements can be made between the teacher and student or teacher and a small group. These agreements specify what learning activities and responsibilities are expected of each party.

Using immediate feedback and correction is one key way to keep student interest high. Many ED classrooms overemphasize using packets or folders of work that each student is expected to complete during the day and then turn in to the teacher. Any feedback or correction that occurs is often delayed until the next day, which limits its usefulness. Effectiveness of curriculum instruction can be facilitated by ensuring immediate and frequent opportunities for interactive feedback between the teacher and the student. Such feedback and correction is highly effective in building and maintaining academic interest. Provide extensive opportunities for review and blending learned material with new material, and frequently check for student understanding.

A functional curriculum should also be a part of the instructional program for students who are emotionally disturbed. A functional curriculum emphasizes mastery of skills needed for successful daily living, such as living on a budget, developing basic work skills, and reading and following directions (Coats, 2006).

### **Behavioral**

It is not the intent of this book to provide a comprehensive overview of behavior management in the classroom; multiple resources are available for that purpose (e.g., Walker, Shea, & Bauer, 2004). Frisby (1990) pointed out, however, that positive behavioral support for students who are emotionally disturbed is a key dynamic in an effective classroom, and some foundational specifics should be noted. Larrivee



(2009) differentiated between behavioral interventions that are preventive (keeping misbehaviors from occurring), supportive (assisting the student to regain self-control and return to task), and corrective (ensuring no further misbehavior occurs).

Effectively managing the inappropriate behaviors of students and providing a setting that will lead to developing more appropriate behaviors is critical for learning to occur. This is particularly important because the behaviors of students who are emotionally disturbed are often disruptive to the organization and stability of the classroom program and, at times, dangerous to the health and safety of other students and adults.

Teaching students new and increasingly complex rules and creating conditions in which self-control will be enhanced is one of the functions of the school setting. This is often a long and difficult process. The students' behaviors did not start overnight and will not resolve themselves that quickly.

The school psychologist should be a central part of the teacher's efforts to create and maintain an effective behavior management system in the classroom. The school psychologist can provide individualized support and consultation to the teacher in developing a general behavior management system for the classroom and also for more individualized interventions with specific students. Many school districts have also begun to utilize the services of applied behavior analysts who are certified by the national Behavior Analysis Certification Board. These skilled individuals can be an excellent resource for staff and sites that have exhausted their local resources without success. Staff who also desire written resources to increase their behavior management knowledge and skills are referred to Mayer, Sulzer-Azaroff, and Wallace (2012) or Cipani and Schock (2007). Most behavior management systems utilize a blend of positive rewards for desired behavior (reinforcement) and negative responses to undesired behaviors (punishment).

**Reinforcement** *Reinforcement* refers to stimuli that increase the future probability of the response they follow. Positive reinforcement involves providing a positive reward to the child for performing a desired behavior. For example, a student may be given extra free time on the computer when he or she completes his or her math worksheet within a certain period of time. Negative reinforcement removes something negative or undesired as an outcome to the child for performing the desired behavior. For example, a student may be told he or she does not have to complete the remainder of the assigned math worksheet if the first 10 problems are correctly solved within a certain period of time. Reinforcement will be most powerful to the student if it is immediately given following the desired behavior. Positive behavioral support (reinforcement of desired behaviors) is a key dynamic in classrooms for students who are emotionally disturbed.

Selecting reinforcers for a particular student should be systematically conducted, starting with those that are most natural to a situation and moving only gradually toward more artificial ones (Mayer et al., 2012). If reinforcers typically include praise or other social rewards, then these should be tried first. If star charts or "classroom bucks" are naturally occurring, then begin with them. Classes of reinforcers generally move from least naturally occurring to most naturally occurring as follows.

- Food: Crackers, candy, drinks
- Tangibles: Stickers, pencils, toys, books

- Activities: Free reading time, extra time on computer, special monitor assignments, field trips
- Symbolic: Grades, classroom money, points and stars traded in for desired activities or objects
- Social: Recognition, awards, attention, praise

Reinforcement should always follow the principles outlined by Walker et al. (2004) and Cooper, Heron, and Heward (2007) to be most successful.

*Reinforcement is dependent on the exhibition of the desired behavior.* To most effectively increase a desired behavior, the teacher must reinforce the behavior only after it has been demonstrated in the classroom setting, and only the as it has been clearly identified to the student by the teacher. It is critical to ensure that the student clearly understands the connection between the desired behavior and the reinforcer.

Joey is a slow worker, and Ms. Reynolds, his teacher, wants to increase his rate of turning in his independent worksheets. She tells him that he will now earn rewards for completely finishing his math worksheet. Ms. Reynolds avoids discouraging Joey by reinforcing him whenever she sees that he has been working hard on his worksheet throughout the work period, even if he has not fully completed it. Joey's rate of worksheet completion has not increased.

*The desired behavior is to be reinforced immediately after it is exhibited.* Any reinforcement most powerfully affects the behavior that occurs just before the reinforcement is given. Inadvertent delay may result in other less desired behaviors occurring before reinforcement is given, and it is those behaviors that may be reinforced.

Joey is being reinforced for completing his math worksheet. After he completes it one day, another student belittles Joey, who responds by physically assaulting the student. Ms. Reynolds comes over at that moment and gives Joey a sticker for his good work on the math worksheet.

Some reinforcers may be based on duration of a desired behavior, rather than simply the demonstration of a behavior. Always make sure that reinforcement is being provided at a level sufficient for the student to have a strong chance of success.

One classroom teacher stated that students who received no demerits for the entire week were given free popcorn on Friday during lunch. Very few students were able to demonstrate that sustained level of positive behavior for such a long period of time, despite the fact that students had identified popcorn as a strong reinforcer.

In general, 80% of baseline is considered a good starting point. Accordingly, if Joey is completing 10 problems on his independent math worksheet each day, and the teacher wants to increase the number of problems completed, she should begin by providing a desired reinforcer to Joey whenever he has completed eight problems. Similarly, if a student is able to demonstrate a desired appropriate behavior for

40 minutes (e.g., sustained, on-task behavior), and the teacher wants to increase the length of time that behavior is demonstrated, reinforcement should be provided when the student has demonstrated that desired behavior for 32 minutes.

*The desired behavior is reinforced every time it is exhibited during the initial stages of the behavior change process.* The desired behavior needs to be consistently reinforced (continuous reinforcement) every time it occurs. The behavior needs to have the opportunity to become strengthened and established because the desired behaviors often increase gradually rather than dramatically.

Many teachers become discouraged at this point and state that they are too involved in trying to keep the classroom program progressing to be able to monitor every instance of the student's desired behavior across the day. The evaluator should emphasize to the teacher that the desired behavior does not have to be monitored across the day. The effort to provide continuous reinforcement for many behaviors should begin for a short time period. This may be for 10–15 minutes or for however long the teacher is willing to make a commitment to the behavior change effort. The initial purpose is to determine only whether the intervention process is effective. The time period can gradually be lengthened, once an effective reinforcer or set of reinforcers has been identified. At this point, a continuous reinforcement process can be shifted to an intermittent reinforcement schedule.

*When the desired behavior reaches a satisfactory level, it is reinforced intermittently.* Continuous reinforcement is necessary to ensure that the desired behavior becomes established at a consistent level. Once this has occurred and the student is demonstrating the behavior at a consistently high level, ongoing reinforcement of that behavior should be gradually reduced to a level that will continue the behavior. For example, a student has been reinforced with a sticker whenever he completes a daily independent math worksheet. He now is consistently completing his work sheets. The teacher now rewards him with a sticker only every other day for completing his worksheet (although she may continue to provide an appropriate natural reinforcer, such as praise) or involve natural objects or events in the classroom setting, such as extended access to computers or video games or classroom “helper” responsibilities.

*If tangible reinforcers are used, then social reinforcers should always be used with them.* The purpose of all reinforcement is ultimately to place the control of the behavior under the contingencies of the natural environment (natural reinforcers). Because many of the reinforcers used in the classroom to build positive student behaviors do not occur in the real world, it is important to ensure that efforts are continually being made to gradually shift the reinforcers to those that would be found in the natural environment. Such reinforcers would tend to be social in nature (e.g., praise, compliments, attention).

When more artificial reinforcers (e.g., tokens, food, stickers) are provided to the student, they should always be accompanied by a social reinforcer (e.g., praise, a pat on the shoulder). The teacher should gradually begin to replace these artificial reinforcers with the social reinforcers as the behavior program progresses. The key word here is *gradually*. If the replacement process begins to result in an increasing reoccurrence of the undesired behaviors, then it is most likely that the reduction of the artificial reinforcers has been too abrupt, and it will be necessary to slow the replacement process.

Teachers sometimes fear that reinforcing one child might increase the negative behavior of another child in order to get a reward. This concern is often voiced by teachers when a number of children in a class are on individual programs or only one child in a large class is receiving special rewards for increasing desired behavior. Although there has been little evidence to support this concern, one way to avoid this potential problem is to have the target child's performance result in extra reinforcement for the entire group. Therefore, all of the children are rewarded for a child's improved behavior, and they, in turn, are more likely to reinforce and encourage the child's behaviors (Mayer et al., 2012).

Sometimes it is more efficient to create group contingencies in a classroom setting in which students receive reinforcement based on the behavior of the group members. Group contingencies often result in students actively attempting to help each other reach the required level of performance so that all members of the group can receive the reinforcement, which can increase cooperative student behaviors: "These interventions are well suited to situations where a teacher wants to reinforce similar behaviors by all students in the class, such as on-task and good learning behaviors" (Smith & Yell, 2013, p. 127). Thorne and Kamps (2008) noted that group-oriented interventions are relatively easy to implement, and students tend to enjoy them. However, the teacher needs to closely monitor such interventions, as peers may place inappropriate pressure on group members to meet the group reinforcement criteria. There are three types of group contingencies—*independent*, *interdependent*, and *dependent*. The primary difference between the three involves how students are rewarded.

An *independent* group contingency involves setting the same required response (and reinforcement) for all members of the group but rewards each student for individual performance. For example, the teacher may tell the students in the group that they are required to finish their math assignment and that each student who does so will receive five dollars in "class cash." Ensure that the group membership is fairly homogenous because the ability levels of students who are emotionally disturbed are so varied. Alternately, the contingency for individual students may need to be modified to their ability level.

An *interdependent* group contingency involves treating the group as if it were one single student. All members of the group receive reinforcement but only if all members of the group have demonstrated the desired behavior. For example, a group may be told that it will receive an additional 15 minutes of recess if every member of the group completes his or her math worksheet with less than three errors per student. This type of group contingency often results in more cooperative learning because helping another student meet the criterion results in a much higher probability of the helping students receiving the reinforcement.

A *dependent* group contingency involves giving reinforcement solely based on the activity or behavior of one member (or a few members) of the group. For example, a group may be told that their reinforcement will depend on how much improvement the lowest performer in the group makes on a group math test. This contingency can lead to increased student support and cooperative behavior, but care should be taken to ensure that group members do not threaten or punish the student whose performance will determine whether anyone is rewarded.

If students appear to become less responsive to specific reinforcers, then it may be necessary to create a new set of reinforcers. Reinforcer sampling and a reinforcement menu are two methods often used.

**Reinforcer Sampling** Reinforcer sampling involves introducing the student to a novel stimulus that the student will find rewarding. This method is used to create new reinforcers for the student.

Ms. Reynolds reads the beginning of a new library book to the students. She does not finish reading the book but tells the students that when they complete their assigned work for the morning, they can borrow the book to find out its ending. The students are motivated to find out what happened next in the book and work to finish their assignments. When the students finish the book, Ms. Reynolds suggests other books that they might also like, and their motivation continues to remain high.

**Reinforcement Menu** The reinforcement menu involves determining a set or variety of reinforcers that the student had demonstrated an interest in and placing them into a menu format. The teacher presents the menu to the student when he or she has earned a reinforcer, and the student is allowed to make one selection from the menu. This method is particularly useful for students who quickly satiate on a specific reinforcer and keeps interest high because of the variety of desired reinforcers that are offered.

It is critical to follow through on all consequences when students demonstrate undesired behaviors. This demonstrates a consistency on which students can depend. Students feel a sense of security in knowing that the teacher will always follow through with his or her commitments. Conversely, teachers who do not follow through create an insecure environment. Students cannot rely on them for consistency. Students who are aggressive or defiant will often misbehave because they know the teacher may not enforce the consequences for their inappropriate behavior. Teachers also leave themselves open to the accusation that they do not treat all students fairly, which can result in major problems in classroom management. Failure to follow through with stated consequences weakens the teacher's ability to maintain an orderly classroom.

Although extra rewards or incentives can help build a positive classroom climate, avoid using a behavior management system that is difficult or complex. Also ensure that all students are able to obtain the positive reinforcers. A student who believes that it will be too difficult to obtain the offered rewards will easily become discouraged and fail to become involved in the behavioral system.

**Token Economy Systems** Many ED classroom programs use a form of reinforcement for desired behaviors known as a token economy system. This format has been used as a means of promoting positive behaviors in a manner that is both effective and easy to use (Ayllon, 1999). A token is delivered to the student when the desired response occurs; these tokens are exchangeable at a later time for a reinforcing event, activity, or object. Many teachers utilize this system because of its relative ease of administration.

A token is any object or symbol that that can be exchanged for a desired back-up reinforcer at a later time. A token can be a poker chip, a sticker, or even a "behavior buck," depending on the age of the students in the classroom. The number or value of the tokens may be progressively decreased (inflation) as the desired behaviors are more consistently demonstrated.

Ms. Conlan utilized a token economy system in her classroom using “Conlan cash,” tokens that resembled currency. Students earned tokens by following the classroom rules, accurately completing their work and in a timely manner, and demonstrating appropriate social skills throughout the day. Students kept their tokens and could exchange them at the end of the day for a variety of desired activities, objects, or events (e.g., being first in line at recess, extra computer time, small toy cars, pictures of popular movie and television stars). To build her students’ capacity for delay of gratification and long-term planning, each student who earned a minimum number of tokens also earned a “savings bond” token. These tokens could be redeemed at the end of each week and included larger reinforcers (e.g., having a special lunch with the teacher, playing a board game with the principal).

The teacher should keep several considerations in mind to ensure that a token economy system is maximally effective.

- Continually monitor the rate at which tokens are being provided. The number of earned tokens should relate to the prices set for the desired reinforcers. Prices should be adjusted so that most students will be able to afford some reinforcement and still have some points left over. Keep track of high- and low-preference items in order to set appropriate token prices.
- Ensure that students are clear on how the system works, how tokens are earned, and how they may be exchanged for reinforcers. It is important that students be able to see and count the value of the tokens.
- Ensure that the tokens selected are difficult to duplicate. For example, if using poker chips, make sure students do not bring additional poker chips from home.
- Pair token delivery with social reinforcement.

Vannest, Reynolds, and Kamphaus (2008) suggested creating a visual chart of reinforcers, the quantity of tokens needed to purchase each reinforcer, and the schedule for access to the reinforcers.

Using a token system may affect the individual teacher’s budget because tangible reinforcers are not often included in a classroom budget. The teacher should attempt to develop and provide cost-efficient reinforcers (e.g., going to lunch with the teacher, receiving extra privileges) (Shepherd, 2010).

***Punishment and Reducing Undesired Behaviors*** Using aversive interventions (i.e., punishment) to reduce undesired behavior in the classroom has a long educational history. Using it as a central component of behavior management in an ED classroom is not recommended, however. Although its use may rapidly stop a specific undesired behavior, that behavior is rarely eliminated, particularly if the student is not provided with a positive means of obtaining what his or her misbehavior seeks to accomplish. Instead, the behavior will often continue, but with an increased effort to avoid the attention of the teacher.

An overuse of punishment is also more likely to increase aggressive reactions by students, especially if escape from the punishment is blocked (Mayer et al., 2012). The teacher is also providing a clear, if unintended, model for using aversive behaviors to get one’s way.

Aversive consequences should generally be avoided in the ED classroom unless there are situations that arise in which there is an immediate danger of harm to others, significant destruction of property, or other severe consequences. Many resources are available to learn how to effectively use aversive interventions (e.g., Foxx, 1982). It is more effective to use a procedure referred to as differential reinforcement to significantly and permanently reduce or eliminate the number and duration of undesired behaviors in the classroom.

**Differential Reinforcement** Differential reinforcement in the ED classroom can be defined as a two-part intervention in which a desired response to a stimulus is reinforced, while other responses to that same stimulus are not reinforced. The undesired behaviors will be reduced as the desired behavior is repeatedly reinforced over time (initially with continuous reinforcement) and all other behavioral responses to the stimulus are not.

For example, there may be a classroom rule that students are to raise their hands before they will be called on for an answer or response. In addition to establishing an ongoing classroom routine that emphasizes this behavior, differential reinforcement may be used to ensure its effectiveness.

Teacher (to class): Who knows when the Civil War began?

Joey (yells out): When they blew up Fort Sumter!

Teacher (ignoring Joey): Bobby, great hand raising! Do you know when the Civil War began?

Bobby: When the Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter.

Teacher: Excellent! Good job, Bobby. Now, who can tell me the capital of the Confederacy? (Sees Joey raise his hand) Joey, do you know the answer?

Joey: Richmond.

Teacher: Correct! Great answer, Joey! Now, let's look at some of the other questions that we'll need to answer on this worksheet.

Many types of differential reinforcement can effectively be used by the teacher in the ED classroom, most of which are described in general handbooks of behavior analysis and management (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007; Mayer et al., 2012).

### Group Management and Dynamics

Research is very clear: The most effective ED teachers are those who set up a clearly defined and highly structured set of classroom rules and procedures that are integrated into a workable system that is carefully taught to the students (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Teachers who understand group management and group dynamics are much more effective in their ability to implement a dynamic classroom program that provides educational benefit to students who are emotionally disturbed, and research consistently underscores the strong relationship between teachers' classroom management skills and student achievement

(Jones, 2011). For example, Freiberg and LaPointe (2006) reported that a synthesis of more than 40 classroom management studies indicated that the most effective teachers engaged in a comprehensive set of behavioral standards, including the following.

- Set up a workable system of routines.
- Carefully teach, reteach, model, and practice classroom rules.
- Closely monitor students and do not allow them unrestricted movement within the classroom.
- Treat inappropriate behavior the same as less effective teachers, but stop it sooner.
- Ensure that consequences for positive and inappropriate behavior are clearly understood and consistently applied.
- Establish credibility early.
- Be highly predictable.

Creating this organized, predictable, and structured classroom setting is the first step in positive group management, and developing a set of expectations and rules for the classroom is essential in the first days of school (Rapp & Arndt, 2012). Because students who are emotionally disturbed have very little inner emotional control, structure must initially come from their external environment (Tompkins, 1998). The teacher provides a structure for the classroom that is a complex social, psychological, and instructional setting, which includes the emotional climate and the nature and quality of social activity in the classroom. The classroom structure involves the physical space, the structure of the curriculum, the materials, the schedule, the activities for the day, rules governing appropriate behavior, and consequences for inappropriate behavior. For example, students who need closer supervision can be seated closer to the teacher, which allows the teacher to more frequently check work progress and facilitate monitoring of individual behavior. Students who tend to elope more frequently should be seated as far from the classroom door as possible.

**Creating Routines** Routines are clearly established ways of operating that define what classroom expectations are and how they should be met. They also assist in creating setting events and antecedents for behavior. Routines can provide structure and security for the student who is emotionally disturbed. Have the classroom ready each morning—teachers should ensure that all necessary classroom materials and supplies are available in sufficient quantities, that all equipment is working, and that each activity for the day is planned out and ready to implement.

Maintain a predictable schedule. Daily schedules can reduce student stress by helping them anticipate what comes next. Gallagher (1988), Partin (2009), and others recommended scheduling techniques such as the following as aids in carrying out activities.

- Provide each student with an individual daily schedule.
- Schedule work that can be finished by the end of the school day.



- Require students to complete one task before beginning another.
- Plan ahead and anticipate student needs.
- Establish expectations in advance and do not introduce unexpected activities.
- Alternate easier tasks with harder tasks.
- Provide time reminders.

Students should experience success much more often than failure in their learning tasks. Teachers must carefully watch student progress in order to assign learning tasks at which they can succeed more often than not. Mayer et al. (2012) observed that students are most likely to be off task when their assignments are too difficult or not clearly understood.

Give clear and specific directions, and use simple and neutral language. Many students who are emotionally disturbed have marked impairments in communication skills. Anxious children often cannot remember a list of instructions and disorganized children often have trouble with sequences. It may be necessary to give directions at each step of an activity rather than all at once. Excess verbiage, complex or difficult terminology, and emotionally loaded words all tend to increase the child's anxiety. When this happens, the child acts out, withdraws, or becomes more disorganized.

The teacher should also make an effort to ensure that there is a high ratio of positive statements to negative statements made to each student because students who are emotionally disturbed are sensitive to teacher praise and criticism. It is often easy for the teacher to engage in a disproportionate amount of negative comments to students because negative (usually externalizing) behaviors are more easily observed by the teacher than positive behaviors. This may not only result in a negative classroom climate, but also the amount of demonstrated inappropriate behaviors may actually increase when students receive more attention for inappropriate behaviors than for appropriate behaviors (Jones, 2011).

**Classroom Rules** Students need a clear idea of behavioral expectations in the classroom. A well-managed classroom will have guidelines for how to behave in all settings. A lack of clear classroom rules can waste large amounts of time, increase student anxiety, and result in behavior difficulties. Elementary classroom rules should generally be limited to three for the lower grades and up to five for upper grades and represent general expectations or standards for behavior (Springer, Alexander, & Persiani, 2012). For example, classroom rules could include the following, depending on age level:

- Keep your hands and feet to your self.
- Use a friendly talking voice.
- Stay in your seat.
- Raise your hand before speaking.
- Respect the personal space of others.

Classroom rules should be periodically reviewed and practiced with the students, using specific examples, role-playing, and other ways of providing concrete learning.

**Transitions** Students engaged in individual rather than group activities may finish at different times. This may lead to multiple individual transitions during the instructional period, causing confusion and lost time. When students become disengaged because a transition to another activity is extensive, it is often difficult to get them back on task (Smith & Yell, 2013). Some students may not know what to do, and others may become off task or deliberately avoid a new activity that is not preferred. More efficient transitions can be produced if the teacher is alert to help students who are between activities. The teacher should do the following to assist in this process.

- Know what all students are supposed to be doing at any given time so that their efforts can be supported and problems can be prevented.
- Have students bring completed work to be checked to provide structure during the shift to a new activity and to be sure that students know how to get started on the new activity.
- Ensure students know what they are expected to do and what conduct is appropriate.
- Be alert for students who are having difficulty getting started or completing an activity. Do not become overly involved in helping one or a few students, and focus on prevention—do not wait until students quit working or become disruptive before providing assistance.
- Circulate among the students and periodically look at their work. Frequently scan the room to detect early signs of frustration or task avoidance.
- Identify those few students who require more supervision than others. Be sure these students are seated where you can readily observe and assist them.

Transition times may be particularly difficult for younger students, and they may quickly lose control of themselves if they do not know what to expect and what is expected of them. Romo (2005) recommended the following for these students.

- Ensure that daily routines have as few transitions as possible.
- Plan routines so that active times alternate with quiet times and there is a gradual increase or decrease of tempo activities.
- Give reminders before activity changes.
- Clearly signal the end of activities and the move from one activity to the next.
- Start the next activity right away, even if all students have not yet gotten there.
- Do dry runs (practice).

## Human Relationships

The term *human relationships* refers to that part of the classroom program that is focused on feelings, emotions, support, and acceptance. This domain emphasizes the capacity of the teacher to create a sense of rapport with his or her students. Because students who are emotionally disturbed are often experiencing strong feelings and emotions, the way in which the teacher is able to respond to their anxiety, depression, or anger will determine the emotional quality of the classroom program and the student's overall availability for learning. The teacher must be able to respond to problem situations in a manner that helps students to constructively deal with their emotions and to reduce further discomfort or distress.

The degree to which teachers are able to develop caring and genuine relationships with their students is a significant dynamic in developing an effective ED classroom program. This requires that teachers provide a confluent environment for students—being able to shift between academic and emotional elements in learning, depending on the immediate needs of the student (Lederman, 1969). The teacher functions as a therapeutic support for the students in many ways, and the quality of this therapeutic dynamic is often the key to winning their cooperation. For example, this may require the need to adjust academic expectations if the student is having an especially bad day. A positive, supportive, structured, and predictable environment is key to helping the student feel safe and accepted. Marzano et al. (2003) found that developing positive student–teacher relationships was the foundation of effective management and could reduce behavior problems in the classroom by 31%.

Congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard are the necessary and sufficient conditions for creating an emotionally supportive classroom (Thompson & Rudolph, 2000). Congruence means that the teacher is honest and direct with students and maintains a clear sense of self-identity. Students clearly understand how the teacher is feeling, reacting, and responding to their classroom behaviors and actions. The teacher shows a willingness and ability to openly deal with problems and conflicts. As a result, students come to trust the statements of the teacher.

Unconditional positive regard refers to the fact that the teacher consistently behaves in a manner that respects student self-worth and dignity so that students feel that they are accepted for who they are, regardless of their behavior. The teacher and students regard each other positively. Students trust that their teacher will respect and accept their efforts and not ridicule or belittle them.

Empathy is the capacity of the teacher to listen nonjudgmentally to the concerns, fear, and frustrations of the student and, by doing so, demonstrates that each student is worth hearing and understanding. Johns and Carr (1995) identified several specific strategies and teaching practices that can facilitate creating a supportive therapeutic milieu within the classroom. Some of these include

- Work to build active and positive rapport.
- Emphasize the positive with students.
- Talk with students at the first sign of behavior problems rather than waiting until problems escalate.
- Talk with students privately—show respect.

- Compliment students for their success and accomplishments.
- Do not take misbehaviors personally.
- Find out what a student does well and build on it.
- Be consistent.
- Remain calm.
- Inform parents of positives as well as problems.

The life space interview is a specific psychoeducational approach first developed by Redl (1959) and is still widely used (Wood & Long, 1991). Its rationale is that not only do students who are emotionally disturbed have more feelings of anxiety, and guilt than a normal child would but they do not know what to do with such feelings when they experience them. As a result, they are much more likely to act them out.

Following a behavioral crisis, the teacher supports the student in his or her efforts to understand the events that led to the crisis situation and assists the student in taking responsibility for his or her actions by developing a set of alternative behaviors that can be used in future similar situations (Tibbetts, 1987). This is done by listening and responding supportively to the student's perception of the situation as the student experiences it. As the student verbalizes his or her anxiety and anger, the teacher's support reduces the intensity of the student's feelings, and frustration levels are reduced. Even if the student is only minimally communicative, the student may still be involved in an internal primary process dialogue that can increase emotional agitation. It is critical to keep communication flowing with the student, even if it appears at times to be trivial, irrelevant, or circular, in order to reduce the emotional agitation of the student.

At the same time, the student should be assisted by the teacher in clearly understanding the actual sequence of events that led to the crisis situation. The student may often forget parts of the behavioral sequence or distort (or even deny) actual events that occurred because of the intensity of his or her emotional agitation. As this sequence is discussed, the teacher should emphasize and point out to the student the clear link between the student's behaviors and the negative consequences that are now occurring. The teacher should also point out how positive student behavior in these situations can result in more positive outcomes for the student. The teacher can then role-play alternative behaviors with the student, allowing the student to realize that it is his or her responsibility to control his or her own behavior.

Many classroom disturbances can be related to a student's perception that he or she is unimportant, unnoticed, or ignored. Creating a supportive environment in the classroom can significantly reduce behavior problems while providing for a purposeful and focused attitude toward learning and achievement. Teachers should utilize the following skills in their efforts to build positive relationships with students.

- **Paraphrasing:** Rephrase the student's comments back to the student in the teacher's own words, letting the student know of the teacher's interest, and giving the student the opportunity to correct, modify, or expand upon those comments.

- **Clarifying:** Ask questions to ensure that the teacher clearly understands the student's concerns and to gather additional information regarding those concerns. As the student explains his or her concerns, the teacher restates and refocuses the issues as the student has identified them.

**Social Skills** Using formalized social skills training opportunities within the classroom can be an important part of the curriculum because many students who are emotionally disturbed lack an ability to demonstrate appropriate interpersonal relationships with others. Further, many behavior management problems have their foundation in social skills deficits. Evidence also suggests that building classroom social skills can lead to increased academic performance (Sugai & Lewis, 1996). Teaching social skills generally utilizes a cognitive-behavioral approach to building positive social abilities using a sequential and discrete format, most often including 1) introducing the skill, 2) modeling the desired behavior, 3) peer involvement and role-playing of the skill by students, and 4) providing feedback and reinforcement (Shepherd, 2010). Key goals in the social skills training domain are (Skidmore, 2012)

- Helping students gain the skills that will enable them to increasingly control their own behaviors (e.g., how to control their anger and avoid getting into fights)
- Teaching students to regulate their own emotions (e.g., specific strategies for relaxation when anxious or angry)
- Providing students with the ability to deal with difficult or emotional situations in a positive and appropriate manner (e.g., teaching new coping skills)

There are two general approaches to such direct instructional training: the problem-solving approach and the structured learning approach. Both approaches focus on awareness (recognition and group discussion of the specific social skill impairment), practice (rehearsing and role-playing the desired social skills), and application (opportunities to use the taught skills in the classroom and school environments) to different degrees and levels.

Students are taught in the problem-solving approach to generate and respond to a series of problem-solving steps when faced with any kind of a social problem. These steps typically are 1) identify the problem 2) identify possible solutions, 3) determine the probable outcome of each possible solution, 4) choose a solution, and 5) explain how the chosen solution worked out.

Specific social skills are taught using a sequential step-by-step format in the structured learning approach. This is often the more favored approach by teachers because there are a multitude of commercial social skills programs available in the market from numerous publishers and more are being developed every year. These programs are easily adapted to the specific needs of the individual students in the classroom. A few of the more widely and currently used structured learning programs include the following.

**Elementary** A Children's Curriculum for Effective Peer and Teacher Skills (ACCEPTS; Walker, 1983) is a behavioral-type program developed originally for students with learning handicaps (LHS) and ED that teaches the most basic social skills (e.g., making eye contact, giving compliments).

Getting Along with Others (Jackson, Jackson, & Monroe, 1983) is a very structured curriculum teaching 17 basic social skills such as starting a conversation, responding to teasing, and so forth. It has been designed to be taught in either special or general education classes. The curriculum consists of lesson outlines in a book format with clear rationales and examples of how to teach them.

Skillstreaming the Elementary School Child (McGinnis, Sprafkin, Gershaw, & Klein, 2011) is a sequential program designed for second through sixth grades in both special and general education. It is fairly comprehensive and can be extended upward or downward with the companion social skills programs.

**Secondary** ASSET (Hazel, Schumaker, Sherman, & Sheldon, 1995) is a video-based social skills training program that covers eight key social skills (e.g., giving and accepting criticism) in a clearly structured format and is specifically aimed at the LH SDC and ED secondary student population. The program is behavioral, structured, and clearly sequenced.

Skillstreaming the Adolescent (McGinnis et al., 2011) is similar to the elementary version. It is a well-designed program that is a good place to start with adolescents.

Other social-emotional learning programs can be found online through publishers such as PRO-ED, Research Press, or Aspen Publishers. A comprehensive review of social-emotional learning programs can also be found in *An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning*, published by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning and available online at <http://www.casel.org>. The following questions should be asked when looking at a program's application for a specific ED classroom.

- Does it have a clear research base?
- Does it target the key social skills needed for the classroom?
- Is it cost effective?
- Does it address all three key levels of social skills instruction (i.e., awareness, practice, and application)?

## SUMMARY

Teachers who are assigned to work with students who are emotionally disturbed frequently believe that the assessment reports they receive for their students contain very little information that they can use in developing an education program. RiSE reports that “special educators frequently complain that assessment results directed at determining eligibility often provide little educationally relevant information useful for planning and implementing instructional or treatment programs for students with serious emotional disturbances” (1991, p. 34).

This is correct in the larger sense. Each student who is emotionally disturbed has a complex and unique set of clinical and educational circumstances that require an individualized classroom response. Just as there is no “one size fits all” intervention program for students who are emotionally disturbed, there is similarly no one-to-one correspondence between a student with a particular clinical diagnosis and a

particular classroom intervention. Maag and Katsiyannis (2008) noted that an ED label “does not inform treatment. For example, a diagnosis of ADHD, oppositional-defiant disorder, or conduct disorder does not tell educators and clinicians appropriate intervention strategies” (2008, p. 187).

Although research has not specifically delineated effective strategies at this narrow-band level, some general intervention strategies can be identified, primarily with externalizing students. Some clinicians have indicated that three relatively effective strategies, particularly with younger students, include parent training, classroom behavioral interventions, and social skills training (Gimpel & Holland, 2003). These interventions primarily focus on the behavioral dimensions of the student’s emotional difficulties.

It is more difficult to establish a clear link between assessment and intervention for internalizing problems, partly because of the nature of internalized problems. Most assessment data for internalizing students who are emotionally disturbed is descriptive rather than prescriptive. These types of behaviors exhibited by internalizing students who are emotionally disturbed often involve subjective individual perceptions and states as well as the need for mental health intervention. It is not likely that there will be tangible and directly observable behaviors to consider for intervention. Furthermore, any intervention to address the behavioral concerns may or may not address any underlying emotional variables.

Billy spends all of his free time in the boys’ bathroom, where he makes threatening statements to his reflection in the mirror.

Although some behavioral interventions can be developed for this situation, it remains unclear whether a reduction in “mirror talking” would result in anything therapeutic having occurred for Billy. If a clinical evaluation reveals that a student feels excessive guilt and sadness and has an extremely low opinion of self, then everyone can agree that the student needs some therapeutic intervention. What is not as clear is what specific interventions might be most effective in resolving these specific concerns within this specific classroom setting.

Although this lack of linkage can be frustrating, it should be noted that there are increasing efforts to develop such linkages between assessment and intervention. In 1993 the APA began efforts to establish a listing of psychological treatments whose efficacy has been demonstrated through clinical research (Jongsma & Bruce, 2010). These efforts to identify “evidence supported treatments (ESTs)” have continued since that time, but there are multiple issues and concerns that remain unresolved and have prevented the field from moving forward toward a more finalized resolution (Norcross, Beutler, & Levant, 2006). Individuals interested in additional information regarding the identification process for EST interventions and their current status should refer to Norcross and colleagues (2006). Individuals who are more specifically interested in additional information regarding EST interventions with youth may refer to Lonigan and Elbert (1998).