What is Emotional Disturbance?

- Emotional Disturbance is an eligibility category of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- Emotional Disturbance is not a psychological diagnosis but this eligibility category encompasses many different types of emotional and behavioral problems that may be interfering with a student’s education.
- In order to be eligible for special education as emotionally disturbed there needs to be an adverse impact on a student’s learning or social development due to behavioral or emotional difficulties and he or she must need specially designed instruction to address the emotional or behavioral difficulties interfering with their learning.

How is a student identified as Emotionally Disturbed?

The decision to qualify a student as emotionally disturbed is made by the student’s IEP team which makes the decision based on interviews, data and evaluation. A student may be identified as Emotionally Disturbed if they meet at least one of the following criteria -

A. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

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

C. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.

D. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.

E. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

What kinds of characteristics and behaviors are commonly associated with Emotional Disturbance?

- Students with emotional disturbance can’t be categorized or understood by their eligibility alone. The Emotional Disturbance eligibility includes a wide range of emotional disorders and/or behavior problems.
- Common Problems include -
  - Difficulties regulating their mood and managing their response to frustration.
  - Trouble adjusting to changes and transitions.
Difficulty reading and interpreting social cues.

It’s important to understand that a student with emotional disturbance has a disability and behavioral problems such as defiance, work avoidance etc. may be part of that. Not because a student doesn’t WANT to do better but because emotional factors impact his or her ability to succeed.

What kind of services and supports do students with Emotional Disturbance receive?

- Students with Emotional Disturbance have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) which describes the services and interventions they receive. Common supports include -
  - Positive Behavior Supports: Supports include teaching the student new skills, making adjustments to the environment or attending to successful behaviors that encourage support and teach appropriate behavior rather than responding only with disciplinary practices.
  - Functional Assessment and Behavior Support Plans: Assessment and interventions that identify the function, or purpose of a behavior and help students develop new behaviors that meet the same need.
  - Accommodations: Accommodations are changes to areas in the student’s environment such as reducing transitions, modifying workload or adjusting class schedule to help students be more successful and minimize the impact of their disability.
  - Skill Development: Students with Emotional Disturbance may need to develop new skills in areas such as self-regulation, self-management and socialization.
  - Case management: All students identified as emotionally disturbed have a case manager who helps coordinate and deliver their specialized supports.
MYTH: Students with "emotional disturbance" all have disruptive behavior problems.

TRUTH: The eligibility Emotional Disturbance can describes students with a wide variety of behaviors and needs, many of whom do not have any acting-out behaviors.

Go Do It!

If you work with students with an Emotional Disturbance eligibility, try to go a whole week without using the label unless you are only talking about the eligibility category.