Prove Them Wrong

Be There for Secondary Students With an Emotional or Behavioral Disability

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An 18-year-old senior in high school walks into the classroom with a hood pulled over his eyes, his ear buds screaming heavy metal music, carrying no textbooks, and acknowledging no one in the classroom. The teacher speaks up and says, "What's up, Andy?" Andy picks up a binder that was left in the classroom the previous day and before he walks out of the class quietly says, "The ceiling." Is this an example of defiant behavior or would it be considered a form of disruptive behavior? Or is this just Andy's way of saying hello?

Students with an emotional or behavioral disability (EBD) are sometimes judged and feared based on their label before teachers even meet them. These students are different than other students that walk into a classroom, but they should never be feared. They have had more "loops" in their rollercoaster ride of adolescent life than the average teenager. For example, Travis, an 18-year-old senior at a therapeutic day school for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, was given up by his mother at the age of 4, lived with 19 foster families, and attended 14 different schools. Kurt, a 16-year-old junior, was already a seasoned member of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous when he entered high school, and he spent a year in juvenile detention. Chris, a 17-year-old senior with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) had stabbed a teacher with a knife. Last, Erica was raised by her grandmother when her father and mother were killed in a house fire after a night of binge drinking and drug use.

These are the extreme cases of students with EBD that pass through the hallways in public and private schools. Looking at these adolescents, many people would not realize the traumas these individuals have faced and will continue to face as they get older. But as these students walk into the classroom, they are craving attention and acceptance from their teachers, just like every other student. Throughout their lives, some students with EBD have had few, if any, consistent, appropriate adult relationships in their lives (Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, & Alvarez McHatton, 2009). For example, Travis was physically, mentally, sexually, and emotionally abused by several foster families throughout his life. When he acted out at school and received a negative consequence from male teachers, he was often afraid that the male teachers would hit him or belittle him for his actions. Luckily for Travis, one male teacher, Mr. Barnett, reviewed his confidential school file and learned what Travis had experienced throughout his life. Mr. Barnett consulted the school counselor and special education teacher to learn the best possible approach when he interacted with Travis. Once Travis developed an appropriate adult relationship with Mr. Barnett, he realized he was not going to be abused, and he flourished in school.

This article shares advice with secondary school teachers about classroom practices that may help to build and develop trusting relationships with students with EBD. These ideas include classroom techniques for collaborating with the student and his or her parents. Even if a student with EBD walks into a classroom and greets the teacher for the first time by saying, "I hate you because you are a teacher. Leave me alone," it is still possible to prove the student wrong and develop a relationship that may change his or her life forever.

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The Student With EBD

Kauffman (2005) points out that it is often difficult to determine a reliable definition of an emotional or behavioral disability because it is "a thing that exists outside a social context but is a label assigned according to cultural rules . . . an emotional or behavioral disability is whatever behavior a culture's chosen authority figures designate as intolerable" (p. 11). With that thought in mind, for the purpose of this article, we shall use the definition provided by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which defines an emotional or behavioral disorder (disability) as at least one defined characteristic exhibited over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The defined characteristics are: (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 (Bartick-Ericson, 2006; Kauffman, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Keeping with IDEA's definition, it is important to understand that a student with EBD has to manage his or her disability on top of adolescence and other major experiences such as biological, educational, and social role transitions (Bandura, 2006). During the adolescent time period, Pajares and Urdan (2006) state that, "adolescence is a pivotal developmental period in which youth begin to form an enduring sense of personal identity and agency about themselves" (p. x). However, students with EBD often have greater difficulty developing a positive and healthy identity because of their emotional or behavioral disability, which may be caused by genetic factors or life experiences.

Students with EBD have endured life experiences beyond their age that often gives them more wisdom about life than their peers. For example, Jenny, a 15-year-old sophomore with anxiety that manifested into school truancy, attended a residential treatment facility, a therapeutic day school, and transitioned back to a regular high school where she often complained to her case manager that she could not relate to either her peers' or high school stressors in the same way. Jenny felt that her friends' stress could never compare to the stress she endured in attending a residential school, facing multiple court appearances, and having detentions because of her truancy. Even though these life experiences affected Jenny, she had not mastered the tools of how to apply this new wisdom to everyday situations. The same may be true for other students with EBD. They still need help in practicing these coping techniques in safe environments, such as home and school, in order to continue to manage their feelings of anger, distrust, and abandonment.

Moreover, students with EBD may ask questions for which they want deeper answers, not a dismissive answer to try to appease them. For example, if a teacher requests a student with EBD to be respectful during a guest speaker's presentation, the student may ask "Why?"—but consider that the student may also be asking "How?" A thorough answer could be, "Being respectful for our guest speaker means listening during the presentation, looking at the speaker in an attentive manner, and thinking of questions you may want to ask at the end of the presentation. These are respectful and mature behaviors. When you do these things, this lets the speaker know that you value what he has to say because your behaviors are mature and polite. As a speaker, he feels you appreciate the content he has shared with you." A dismissive answer may be, "Because I told you to and that is the rule."

As do all students, students with EBD expect teachers to be honest with them when they ask for advice. They do not expect the teacher to fully understand their problem; oftentimes they just want the teacher to listen. As Baker and Brigham (2007) point out, "it is unlikely that most educators teach in the kind of schools that they themselves attended" (p. 116) or experience similar situations. Teachers may find it difficult to understand what a student with EBD is experiencing because their adolescence may have been drastically different. However, the key is to not only listen but to *hear* what the student is saying.

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In order to hear what a student is trying to communicate, a teacher should use active listening skills to understand the full message. The goal of active listening is to create a clear understanding of the student's spoken concern and to acknowledge an interest in the message being verbalized (McNaughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, & Schreiner, 2007). Examples of active listening skills that can be used with students with EBD include (a) looking and feeling relaxed to give the student the feeling that they are not wasting your time, (b) showing interest through your body language, (c) allowing the other person to talk, (d) being open-minded during the conversation, (e) trying to understand the student's feelings or point of view by asking specific questions, (f) observing the student's body language, (g) repeating back what the student has shared with you to make sure you heard him or her correctly, and (h) encouraging and reinforcing his or her positive behavior of confiding in you as a teacher. More specific examples of teachers using active listening skills with students with EBD are found in Table 1.

After listening and giving the student the opportunity to be heard, if the student is willing, help him or her find solutions to the problem or show him or her the tools that will help. Teach the student the skills that he or she will need to be successful in the future. Some things that teachers can suggest to a student with EBD are (a) writing or drawing his or her feelings if a confidant is not around, (b) letting the student know that you could check in with him or her from time to time, (c) asking him or her what is the best way to interact with him or her, (d) providing him or her with a safe place to relax, (e) helping him or her find ways to manage stress, and (f) reinforcing his or her choices.

Last, students with EBD typically have low self-efficacy, which affects how they motivate themselves and their perseverance to face difficult situations, and it causes them to quickly give up trying (Bandura, 2006). The lack of motivation and perseverance is often compounded by the fact that students with EBD process and manifest stimuli in negative ways that result in inappropriate behaviors. The negative behaviors that are exhibited often hinder academic and social success for these students (Jackson & Owens, 1999). The goal of the teacher is to help the students with their coping skills and to teach strategies to process incoming stimuli in a positive way so as to maintain the ability to learn. Once that ability to learn is stable, then the teacher can help students develop a sense of self-efficacy so that they can realize that they are contributors to their "life circumstances not just products of them" (Bandura, 2006, p. 3).

Table 1. Examples of Teachers Using Active and Nonactive Listening Skills With Students With Emotional or Behavioral Disabilities

Active Listening	Nonactive Listening
Stopping all activities and focusing on the student.	Multitasking—Trying to listen while performing another task.
Making eye contact with the student.	Not making eye contact with the student.
Looking and feeling relaxed as the student speaks with you.	Slouching or looking disinterested as the student speaks.
Being open-minded and trying to understand the student's point of view.	Closed off body language (i.e., arms across the chest or back turned to student).
Asking specific questions.	Not asking questions.
Repeating back what the student has shared with you to make sure you heard him or her correctly.	Cutting the student off or not letting him or her finish speaking before making a comment.
Encouraging and reinforcing the student's positive behavior of confiding in you as a teacher, such as saying, "I appreciate your taking the time to talk with me about things that are important to you."	Dismissing what the student has shared with you, such as saying, "I hear this all the time. You'll be okay. I don't know why you'd worry about something so silly."

Safe Classroom

Murray and Pianta (2007) state that "all teachers are aware of the importance of creating classroom environments that have structures in place that ensure the safety of students, promote positive behavior, and ensure the flow of classroom activities" (p. 108). Creating a classroom management style takes time to develop and often changes from year to year based on the student population. However, it is imperative to remember to maintain a structured environment that minimizes disruptive behaviors and promotes learning. In a structured and consistent environment, the students with EBD feel safer because they understand and know the guidelines and expectations from the teacher. Better yet, if this environment is consistent across all classes, this is especially helpful for students with EBD.

In many schools, the physical classroom does not enhance the learning experience because it is often a boring, dull room with white or gray cinder-block walls, tile or carpeted floors, and overhead fluorescent lights. Many teachers try to enhance the classroom atmosphere by decorating the walls with posters and class content information that is helpful for the students learning in that class. Some teachers scatter the room with lamps or bring in natural sunlight, use tables instead of desks to encourage social interaction and collaboration among the students and teachers, and decorate the walls with posters and art.

The most important aspect of a safe classroom is for the student to feel comfortable in the environment and to trust the teacher. Murray and Pianta (2007) support the belief that "such settings allow students to develop a sense of trust and comfort with all members of the classroom community" (p. 108). In order for a teacher to develop a trusting relationship with a student with EBD, the student needs to learn how to trust the teacher. If a teacher has pictures of his or her family, accomplishments, or hobbies displayed in the classroom, this will give students with EBD an opportunity to ask questions to begin the development of a trusting relationship. Another way to foster a relationship that is often used in self-contained classrooms is playing cards or completing puzzles with students to create opportunities for the students to ask questions. Puzzles are an excellent way for students to develop problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, and social skills with their peers and their teacher. As an example, one secondary EBD special education classroom in a high school has had so much success with using puzzles in the classroom that general education teachers have requested that the puzzles be completed in their classrooms, using them as a tool for teaching groups of general education students and students with special needs to work together in completing them.

The goal is to create a safe place within the school environment for the students to be themselves. Holley and Steiner (2005) define a safe classroom space as one "in which students are able to openly express their individuality," and that provides "protection from psychological, or emotional, or physical harm" (p. 50). The classroom is an extension of the teacher. If the room feels safe and open, then the students may feel safer with the teacher and risk being open and honest in the school environment. Holley and Steiner go on to report that students expressed that "they were more challenged in

Figure 1. Ten Tips in Managing a Student With an Emotional or Behavioral Disability

1. Prioritize your tasks and make a list.
2. Accept that you wear multiple hats throughout the day.
3. Remember you are the adult.
4. Do not be afraid of the student with EBD; he or she just needs extra attention.
5. Actively listen to the student with EBD.
6. Keep training and reading.
7. Be open to criticism.
8. Do not challenge a student with EBD. He or she is acting that way for a reason. Try to listen to what the student's behavior is telling you.
9. Develop firm boundaries and expectations and stick to them no matter how much the student pushes you.
10. Relax and breathe! You are a teacher for a reason.

terms of personal growth and awareness in classrooms that feel safe" (p. 58). Figure 1 is a brief summary of 10 tips that teachers can use in the classroom to help manage students with EBD.

Parents

IDEA says that all students should be educated in the least restrictive environment for them. Special education laws and county policies can be confusing for trained professionals, but more so for parents. Parents and students need someone to be an advocate for their needs and to help them negotiate special education laws and policies. Any member of the individualized education program (IEP) team can be an advocate for the parent and student in order to agree on the most appropriate accommodations and services for the student with disabilities to successfully access the curriculum. Unfortunately, many times students with EBD do not have an advocate or voice in the school community to help them. Pruitt-Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000) believe that parents should be the cornerstone in the collaboration effort in special education. In order for this to happen, the teacher needs to invest the time in developing a relationship with the parents to establish trust and a strong foundation from which to build as the student progresses through the school year (Davern, 2004).

It is important to remember that parents are the expert on their child's behavior. Parents' thoughts, concerns, and advice should be heard and considered before making any decisions. When working with a parent of a student with EBD, it is best to have ongoing communication. This communication could be in the form of weekly e-mails, weekly or monthly telephone calls, or face-to-face meetings. During conversations with the parents, always try to pass along positive information. Parents of students with EBD often hear negative information about their child and rarely anything positive. Always try to find something positive to say, even if it is the fact that you

enjoy having their child in your class. If you share negative information with a parent, support the information with data and firm facts. For example, provide them with classroom observation data that shows how many times the student was off-task during a certain amount of time. This type of data helps the parent realize that the teachers are speaking from a point of knowledge and evidence, as opposed to personal opinion. Last, never be accusatory when delivering information about negative behaviors. For example, an accusatory statement about a negative behavior might be, "Johnny was off-task nine times during silent reading because he didn't like the book I picked for him." A positive statement about a negative behavior might be, "Johnny was off-task nine times during a 15-minute reading session." Always stick to the facts.

During conversations with the parents, always try to pass along positive information.

Let parents know that you are an advocate for their child. Encourage the parents to call you if they have a concern with another teacher, school policy, or a school administrator. For example, Jack's mom had a difficult time dealing with her son being identified with an emotional disability. She spent several hours in parent conferences with Jack's special education teacher to become educated in the identification process and prepare for the IEP process. Just like Jack's mom, many parents react to information they hear with a lot of emotion. Try and ease the parents' emotions by encouraging them to reach out to you first to help ease any concerns, frustrations, and fears and to help them see what will benefit their child. When you develop a trusting and meaningful relationship with the parents, they learn to trust your suggestions to help their child succeed.

Conclusion

Every student brings his or her own challenges. With those differences and challenges, every student, with or without a disability, has his or her own set of dreams and goals. A teacher's job is to give every student a fair opportunity at preparing for life and to accomplish all his or her goals and dreams. This statement also includes students with EBD. Yes, these students can be a difficult population to teach; however, they can learn many things from their teachers. Just like all students, these students want to learn and grow as much as the next, even if they verbally or silently defy your efforts. It is imperative that their teachers never give up on them.

Be like the handful of teachers that never gave up on Andy—he is graduating from high school and joining the navy in the upcoming year. Or the teacher who took the time to mentor Travis—he has been in the Marines for the past 4 years. Or the two teachers who counseled Chris and Kurt—they are now juniors in college. Or the teacher who helped Erica pass her GED and get into a nursing program. Or the teachers that helped Jenny manage her anxiety and not miss a day of school in more than 2 years.

"Teachers are the central and most powerful force in the lives of young people" (Murray & Pianta, 2007, p. 110). It is time to use that power to support students with EBD; do not give up on them. If you do not give up on them and you are consistent with them, they will excel for you. More important, they will remember you for the rest of their lives as one of the individuals who never gave up on them.

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