

Ask The EXPERTS

Emily Kelman-Bravo, ACSW, CSW Director and Evan Michaels, CSW Social Worker, TSA New York City Counseling Program.



Zero Tolerance and TS in School

The “Zero Tolerance” policies in schools, ostensibly meant to control inappropriate and dangerous behaviors, and offensive language in the school community, have unintended and unwanted consequences for some school age children with TS. The questions below present challenging scenarios that are representative of the kinds of issues faced by families affected by TS.

My son is ten years old and has coprolalia, among other tic symptoms. He has received warnings from his teachers that his use of objectionable language is in violation of the school's Zero Tolerance policies. How can I explain to the school that his offensive outbursts are impossible for him to control?

My thirteen-year-old son has found that being funny is his best route to popularity in school, but his adolescent sense of humor is not always in good taste. I'm afraid that he'll get in trouble or be suspended from school. Sometimes he will blame his behavior on his TS. What can I do as a parent to help him understand the importance of monitoring his behavior and taking responsibility when he's done something wrong?

My daughter's verbal tics often include the very things she doesn't want to say out loud. She has already been sent to the principal's office, apologized and received warnings that she may be suspended from school. We are all guilty of thinking ugly thoughts, but she does not seem able to keep from verbalizing them. Is there anything we can do?

All three questions can be addressed through education. The school must be educated about TS, the associated disorders that affect your children, and how the disorder's manifestations vary from person to person. It's important that they understand that TS is neurologically-based and that the children cannot control the symptoms—including outbursts that in another context would be considered offensive.

Once your family has decided how much information to share, it will be im-

portant to speak to your child's teachers directly and make certain they understand your child's individual situation. TSA's materials can be very effective at communicating the breadth of the impact of TS on school age children. An ongoing relationship with your child's teachers is among the most effective tools you can use to promote awareness.

When Tourette Syndrome and related conditions affect a child in school, it is essential to know your child's rights. Many parents choose to pursue an IEP (Individual Educational Plan) for their child. It is true that some parents think that the IEP will stigmatize their child, but it is one way to document and pursue needed programs and services on an individualized basis. Under current requirements, an official record such as an IEP obligates the school to address individual accommodations regarding Zero Tolerance Policies.

Regarding Questions 1 and 3, students with TS, and their families, will benefit from learning how to explain symptoms to peers and teachers so that misunderstandings or hurtful feelings can be considered and addressed. Clinical support staff such as school psychologists or social workers can be helpful in promoting awareness among fellow students and staff, and in brokering a rapprochement if needed. In some situations, this may require a lot of effort on the part of parents and children alike. In the best case scenario, the teachers and other school personnel will respond positively to your efforts to explain unwanted symptoms to them.

Ultimately, it is hoped, that with the proactive steps you have taken, your child's experience in school will be a positive one. Nonetheless, sometimes alternative educational plans or school placements are needed. If you feel that your child's school is not meeting his or her needs, it may be best to move to another school setting where there will be a better chance of success.

Regarding the young man who has gained popularity as a class clown, parents need to discuss the implications of such behavior with their child. Every family has to decide for itself how to address difficult issues concerning impulsive behavior,



perhaps in consultation with a skilled mental health professional. One of the key

issues is where to draw the line between acceptable content and poor taste when it comes to a display of joking behavior.

Another issue to consider is if the child's popularity is the result of being laughed at, or laughed with. These considerations are tied in with concerns about the child's confidence and self-esteem. Sometimes TS support groups can be helpful in helping parents face questions like these. As with educating others about tics, a proactive approach is desirable. It is important to make the school aware of potential problems with impulsivity and your strategies to improve the situation. It is also vital that parents discuss with their children the potential negative impact of impulsive behavior in the classroom setting, always keeping in mind the individual make-up of your child.

In The Olympic Spirit

Thirteen-year-old David Bowen took his turn with the Olympic flame as part of the relay that carried the torch to Salt Lake City. David was diagnosed with TS when he was eight, but hasn't let his symptoms stop him in the classroom or in any of his athletic pursuits, which include tennis, basketball and baseball. He is also a talented pianist and composer.

The Olympic committee selected 11,500 torch carriers from more than 210,000 nominees. Judges pored through brief essays, looking for inspirational people who embodied the Olympic spirit. Nominated by his uncle in Utah, David was notified in December that he'd been selected.



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