Tips for teachers and school staff from students with mental health and behavioral challenges

Youth with mental health and behavior challenges are often sensitive about their disabilities and may be uncomfortable talking directly to school staff about the challenges they face. Members of PACER's Mental Health Youth Advisory Board developed the following ideas to share with school staff.

Please treat me with respect

- I learn more by what you do than what you say. Please model the attitude and behavior you would like me to follow. When I hear positive things about myself and feel respected, I treat others the same way. I learn from positive examples how to be patient and resolve conflicts.
- Privacy is important to me. I feel embarrassed if someone points out my disability and need for special accommodations or medication in front of my peers, and I worry that an adult will ask, "Did you take your medication today?" when I'm with other students.
- If I receive special education services and have an Individualized Education Program or a 504 plan, please refer to the data and documentation provided to help you understand the support I need to be successful in school.
- Your encouragement builds me up. Criticism and harsh words can hurt and affect me. When I lack self-esteem, it is easy for me to believe others' negative remarks about me—even if they are untrue.

Please take the time to know me

- Keep an open mind as we become acquainted. Sometimes statements in records or opinions are based on the past, and they may not accurately portray who I am now. Everyone needs a second chance; help me to develop a positive image.
- Tell me what you like about me and what you see me doing correctly. I am already very aware of my faults and what I do wrong.
- If there is an incident in school, please listen to me. Let me tell my story before making a judgment.
- Try to understand my mental health and behavior challenges. Learning about my challenges through training or other resources will equip you to assist me with empathy.
- The medications I take may cause side effects such as dizziness, sleepiness, or needing to use the bathroom more frequently. I appreciate your understanding as I deal with the issues.
- Sometimes my disability makes me feel like I am out of control. I probably need structure, but please allow me some choices or participation in making decisions.

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PACER Tip Sheet

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- Usually I am not trying to misbehave. Sometimes I have simply not learned the right way to handle things. My mental health challenges can have an impact on how my brain works, and I may have difficulty controlling my thoughts, emotions, or actions. I need to learn behavioral skills, much as I learn math. With your help, I want to improve things!

Please help me feel safe

- Advocate for me at school. I really need an adult at school who will support me and look out for my best interests.
- If I come to you and say that I am being teased, bullied, or harassed, please help me right away.
- You have the influence to provide a positive school environment among students and school staff. Two suggestions: respect confidential information and discourage gossip about individual students.
- Take my concerns seriously. Do not dismiss them because I have mental health or behavioral challenges.

Please help me learn

- Remember that I do want to learn, feel successful, and be liked by others. Sometimes my disability and resulting lack of skills interfere.
- The accommodations on my IEP or Section 504 plan affect us both. Together with my positive behavior intervention plan (if I have one), they are designed to help us succeed together.
- I usually learn more through positive instruction than through punishment. I know there are consequences for my actions, but please teach me how to replace unacceptable behavior with what is appropriate.
- Work with me to create learning or coping strategies. Include me in developing interventions, I may know more about what I need then I get credit for knowing.

Please know that I appreciate your efforts

One teacher's positive impact can help move my life in the right direction. I hope you will be that teacher. Thank you for your willingness to grow as a professional and for taking the time to help me learn.

Additional information

Visit PACER's YouTube channel to view previously recorded webinars about accessing information, support, and services for children with mental health needs.

PACER's Mental Health Youth Advisory Board was comprised of youth between the ages of 14-18 (and up to 21 if on an IEP) who have mental health and behavior challenges. Please contact PACER at (952) 838-9000 for more information.