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Prove Them Wrong: Be There for Secondary Students with an Emotional or Behavior Disability

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An eighteen-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 EBD 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 eighteen-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 four, lived with nineteen foster families, and attended fourteen different schools. Kurt, a sixteen-year-old junior, was already a seasoned member of Alcohol Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) when he entered high school, and he had spent a year in juvenile detention. Chris, a seventeen-year-old senior with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) had stabbed a teacher with a knife. Lastly, Erica was raised by her grandmother after 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 deal with 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, took the time to review his confidential school file and learn what Travis had experienced throughout his life. Mr. Barnett consulted the school counselor and special education teacher to learn the best possible approach when interacting with Travis. Once Travis developed an appropriate adult relationship with Mr.

Barnett, and realized he was not going to be abused, he began to flourish in school.

The purpose of this article is to share advice with secondary school teachers about classroom practices that may help to build and develop trusting relationships with students with EBD. 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.

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 their 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 have been 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 fifteen-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 often complained to her case manager that she cannot 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 faced in attending a residential school, multiple court appearances, and detentions, due to her truancy. Even though these life experiences have given Jenny, and other students with EBD a more philosophical out-look on life, they have not mastered the tools on how to apply their new wisdom to everyday situations. They still need help in practicing their new 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 for, 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 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 both 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 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; often times 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.

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 students

feelings or point of view by asking specific questions, (f) observing the students body language, (g) repeating back what the student has shared with you to make sure you heard them correctly, and (h) encouraging and reinforcing their positive behavior of confiding in you as a teacher. More specific examples of teachers using active listening skills with students with EBD are located in Table 1.

Table 1

Examples of Teachers Using Active and Non-Active Listening Skills with Students with EBD

Active Listening	Non-Active Listening
Stopping all activities and focusing on the student.	Multi-tasking – 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 try to understand the student's point of view.	Closed off body language (i.e., arms across the chest or back turned to them).
Ask specific questions.	Not asking questions.
Repeat back what the student has shared with you to make sure you heard them correctly.	Cutting the student off or not letting them finish speaking before making a comment.
Encourage and reinforce the student's positive behavior of confiding in you as a teacher, such as by saying "I appreciate your taking the time to talk with me about these important things to you."	Dismissing what the student has shared with you, such as by saying "I hear this all the time. You'll be okay; I don't know why you'd worry about something so silly."

After listening and giving the student the opportunity to be heard, if the student is willing, help them find solutions to their problems, or show them the tools that will help them. Teach them the skills that they need to be successful in the future. Some tools a student with EBD could use (a) are to encourage the student to write or draw their feelings if a confidant is not around, (b) let the student know that you could check in with them from time to time, (c) ask them the best way to interact with them, (d) provide them with a safe place to relax, (e) help them find ways to manage stress, and (f) reinforce their choices.

Lastly, students with EBD typically have low self-efficacy, which effects how they motivate themselves, their perseverance to face difficult situations, and

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 create 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 teach the student coping skills and strategies to process the incoming stimuli in a positive way to maintain their ability to learn. Once that ability to learn is stable, then the teacher can help the student develop a sense of self-efficacy so that the student can realize that "they are contributors to their life circumstances not just products of them" (Bandura, 2006, p. 3).

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) to ensure the success of all students. 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. By maintaining a structured and consistent environment the student with EBD feels safer, because they understand and know the guidelines and expectations from the teacher.

In many schools, the physical classroom does not enhance the learning experience because they are often boring, dull rooms with white or gray cinderblock walls, tile or carpeted floors, and overhead fluorescent lights. Many teachers try to enhance the classroom atmosphere by decorating the walls with posters and information that is helpful for the students to learn the content material of 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 support this 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 their 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. Other ways to foster a relationship that is often used in self-contained classrooms is play 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 in the Mid-Atlantic region has had so much success with using puzzles in the classroom that other teachers have requested puzzles to be completed for their classrooms, and groups of general education and students with special needs work together in completing the puzzles. Table 2 summarizes Murray and Pianta's techniques of how a teacher can further enhance the teacher-student relationship.

Table 2

Summary of Murray and Pianta's Techniques of How a Teacher Can Enhance the Teacher-Student Relationship (Murray & Pianta, 2007, p. 107)

Classroom Structures and Practices
- Clearly states routines
- Defined rules and consequences
- Peer tutoring
- Cooperative Learning

Teacher Beliefs, Behaviors, and Actions
- High expectations for students achievement and behavior
- Individual weekly meetings with students
- Frequent positive feedback to the students

Individual Skills for Developing Prosocial Relationships
- Instruction in self-awareness and self-management skills
- Teach social awareness when interacting with others
- Promote responsible decision making in multiple settings.

The goal is to create a safe place for the students to have within the school environment to allow them 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 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 terms of personal growth and awareness in classrooms that feel safe" (pg. 58). Table 3 is a brief summary of ten tips that teachers can use in the classroom to help manage students with EBD.

Table 3

Ten Tips in Managing a Student with EBD

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, they just need 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. They are acting that way for a reason.
9. Develop firm boundaries and expectations and stick to them no matter how much they push you.
10. Relax and breathe! You are a teacher for a reason.

PARENTS

IDEA says that all students should be educated in the least restricted 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 Plan (IEP) team can be an advocate for the parent and student in order to agree upon the most appropriate accommodations and services for the student with disabilities to successfully access the curriculum. Unfortunately, many times students with EBD have no advocate or voice in the school community to help them. Pruitt-Garriott, Wandry, & 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 to build from 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. Their 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 be in constant communication with the parent. This would include weekly emails, weekly or monthly telephone calls, and 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 hardly 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. Lastly, 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.

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 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 preparing 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 emotional concerns, frustration, and fears and to help them see what will benefit their child. By developing a trusting and meaningful relationship with the parents, they learn to trust your suggestions to help their child succeed.

COLLABORATION

Collaboration is defined as meeting with individuals face-to-face to talk about concerns and goals, and staying in constant communication to continually assess situations. Hunt, Soto, Mair, and Doering (2003) concur that "an effective collaborative teaming process involves regular, positive face-to-face interactions, a structure for addressing the issues, performance and monitoring, and clear individual accountability for agreed-upon responsibilities" (p. 317).

Even teachers that are in the classroom all day long are still part of a team when instructing students with EBD. It is imperative that teachers working with

students with EBD develop a close collaborative relationship with the student's case manager, special education teacher, school administrator, therapist, and parent. Developing these relationships is not easy and it takes effort. However, the more individuals helping to support the needs of a student with EBD, the more successful both the teacher and the student will be.

Not every teacher wants to manage or teach students with EBD. Teachers with an endorsement in emotional disability are said to be a special breed of teacher. So it is important to listen to the advice from a special education teacher with an emotional disability endorsement. Just as some teachers are experts in English, Science, or Math, Special Education teachers who work with students with EBD are experts in behaviors. They manage behaviors on a daily basis and have tools and resources to help the school community. Go to them for advice and be open to the fact that the advice they give you in managing a student with EBD might not work the first time or the tenth time, but through consistency it will eventually work.

CONCLUSION

Every student brings with them their own challenges. With those differences and challenges, every student, disability or not, has their own set of dreams and goals. A teacher's job is to give every student a fair shot at preparing them for life and possibly to accomplish their goals and dreams. This includes students with EBD. Yes, they are a difficult population to teach; however, they can learn many things from their teachers. They want to learn and grow as much as the next student, even if they verbally or silently defy your efforts. It is imperative that their teacher never gives up on them. Students with EBD have had more individuals give up on them in life than any other student population a teacher may encounter. Do not be the next person to prove them correct. Instead, prove them wrong.

Be like the handful of teachers that never gave up on Andy, now he is graduating from high school and joining the navy in the upcoming year. Or the teacher who took the time to mentor Travis, who has been enlisted in the Marines for the past four years. Or the two teachers that counseled Chris and Kurt, who are now juniors in college. Or the teacher who helped Erica pass her GED and get into a nursing program. Or the teachers that help Jenny manage her anxiety and not miss a day of school in over two 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 prove students with EBD wrong; 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, but more importantly

they will remember you for the rest of their life as one of the individuals who never gave up on them.

COLOPHON

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