



School Mental Health Communities of Practice

Micro-Skills to Support K-12 Students with Disruptive Behavioral Problems

Signs and Symptoms of Disruptive Behavioral Problems:

Easily getting angry and/or losing one's temper	Having a hard time resisting temptation	Having difficulty getting along with others
Having temper tantrums and/or behavioral outbursts that are inconsistent with one's developmental level	Being aggressive in a way that causes harm, such as bullying, fighting, and/or being cruel to animals	Breaking serious rules, such as running away, staying out at night when told not to, and/or skipping school
Often arguing with adults and/or refusing to comply with adults' rules or requests	Lying, stealing, and/or damaging other people's property on purpose	Often blaming other people for one's own mistakes and/or misbehavior
Often having verbal outburst and/or engaging in verbal tirades	Often squirming and/or fidgeting (and unable to stop if asked)	Talking too much (usually occurring at inappropriate times)
Making careless mistakes	Taking unnecessary risks	Daydreaming a lot
Having trouble taking turns	Being very irritable	Being resentful and/or spiteful
Showing vindictiveness	Being disorganized	Having increased energy
Being unable to focus	Having messy schoolwork	Being easily distracted
Having a low self-esteem	Having a lack of empathy	Having a sense of grandiosity
Often forgetting and/or losing things	Engaging in destructive behavior	Often having rigid and/or racing thoughts
Deliberately annoying others and/or becoming annoyed with others	Having trouble staying on topic when in conversation with others	Having a hard time ignoring things such as trivial noises and/or events
Getting up frequently to walk and/or run around	Running and/or climbing when it is not appropriate	Having trouble doing activities quietly
Interrupting others frequently	Blurting out answers before someone finishes a question	Starting conversations at inappropriate times
Inability to think things through before acting	Using drugs, alcohol, and/or tobacco	Having a lack of remorse for problematic behavior



Action Steps (Micro-Skills) When You Recognize the Signs and Symptoms:

- **Educate students about how to recognize signs and symptoms in themselves and how to ask for help when they experience disruptive behavioral problems:** It is important for students to understand the signs and symptoms of disruptive behavioral problems so that they can accurately identify these concerns when they experience them. It is also important for students who experience disruptive behavioral problems to know how to reach out for help.
 - Use universal education approaches (e.g., Tier 1) to educate groups of students about the general signs and symptoms of disruptive behavioral problems. These general approaches, which should be developmentally appropriate to the age/grade of the students, can occur in a general education class setting (typically facilitated by a teacher or co-facilitated by a teacher and school-based mental health professional) or in specialized social-emotional-learning sessions (typically facilitated by a school-based mental health professional). Students should be given general information about who to go to and how to receive help, should they need it.
 - Use targeted education approaches (e.g., Tier 2) to educate students at risk of experiencing disruptive behavioral problems. Typically, this would entail small group sessions led by a school-based mental health professional and would include more detailed information about signs and symptoms, along with specific coping strategies that students could use to prevent and/or reduce concerns. Students should be given specific information about who to go to and how to receive help, should they need it.
 - Use individualized education approaches (e.g., Tier 3) to educate students who are known to be experiencing disruptive behavioral problems. Typically, this would occur through individual counseling sessions provided by a school-based mental health professional and would include student-specific information about signs and symptoms, along with student-specific strategies to mitigate those concerns. Students should be given information about additional sources of help (e.g., crisis lines, community-based providers) in case they need support at a time that their school-based mental health professional is not available. Teachers and school-based mental health professionals should regularly consult about how to best support students with disruptive behavioral problems during school.
- **Use best practice behavioral management techniques to support students with disruptive behavioral problems:** Students with disruptive behavioral problems need adults in their lives who can provide consistent and constant positive behavioral support in order to encourage more prosocial and appropriate behavior.
 - *Increase supervision of students during high-risk activities in which behavioral problems are more likely to occur.* Unstructured and unsupervised activities



typically have the highest potential for behavioral problems to occur (although please note that behavioral problems can occur during any activities). Review your students' schedules to identify times in which they are engaging in unstructured and unsupervised activities, and determine if additional supervision may be needed during those times.

- *Encourage students to take responsibility and apologize for their roles in social conflicts.* As many students may have never learned how to apologize appropriately, it can be helpful to role play with students how to apologize to someone else. Students should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own behavior that may have brought harm to someone else (whether that behavior was intentional or inadvertent).
- *Ignore behavior that is annoying, but not harmful* (if there are more pressing behavioral issues to address). This is commonly known as the “*pick your battles*” method. School professionals typically have limited resources (e.g., time, patience) to address behavioral issues among students during school. It is recommended that you choose to address the most harmful behaviors occurring during school before moving on to support students displaying other behaviors that may be annoying (but not harmful).
- *Remove privileges when students engage in problematic behaviors.* For this to be most effective, the privilege that is removed should be meaningful to the student (in order to provide sufficient incentive for the student to want to engage in more positive and prosocial behavior).
- *Praise positive behaviors* (e.g., behaviors that are opposite of problematic behaviors). It is extremely important for students to have a deep understanding of the behavioral expectations during school. One way to reinforce those behavioral expectations is to point out and praise students when they are meeting the expectations. When praise is offered publicly, other students have the added benefit of seeing the school's behavioral expectations being reinforced through the acknowledgement of their peers' behaviors.
- *Offer choices whenever possible.* Sometimes, students engage in problematic behavior when they cannot think of an alternative way to act. By offering students positive/prosocial choices in various situations (e.g., academic situations, social situations), it teaches them how to approach a situation from multiple different perspectives.
- *Make tasks more manageable.* When students become overwhelmed by an activity, the risk of behavioral problems increases. Whenever possible, break tasks down into smaller, more manageable chunks. Extend the amount of time students have to complete the task if they seem to be overwhelmed by it.
- *Seek immediate professional help if anyone's safety is at risk* (e.g., from law enforcement, medical help, and/or mental health professionals). Any time a student is engaging in behavior that puts someone else's safety at risk,



immediate action should be taken to protect those involved (including yourself).

- **Use micro-skills daily during class and during school to support students who have disruptive behavioral problems:** Students who experience disruptive behavioral problems can benefit from being in a supportive class and school environment.
 - *Establish clear rules, expectations, and consequences for behavior during school.* In order to ensure that students know what is expected of them behaviorally, give frequent and immediate feedback or consequences as behaviors occur. Ensure that the rules and expectations are clearly written and posted in the classroom, in remote learning materials, and/or throughout the school building. Review the rules and expectations with students regularly.
 - *Establish a clear, consistent, and structured schedule.* Structured schedules help students keep track of what is expected of them throughout their school day. For students with behavioral issues, it may be helpful to review their schedule at various times during the day and prepare them for transitions (timers, signals, or cues can help with transitions). It may be helpful to schedule the most difficult subjects in the morning when students are fresher and less fatigued. Please note that structured schedules can still offer students choices. For example, students can be allowed to choose which project they work on rather than having to focus on a specific project.
 - *Help students simplify and organize their tasks and responsibilities.* For students with behavioral problems, it can be very helpful to break down activities into smaller, more manageable steps. One way to do this is to give concise one- or two-step directions, so that you avoid overwhelming them with too much information at one time. Also, it can be helpful to encourage students to take breaks, when needed (but not to 'give up' on tasks).
 - *Help students identify strategies that can assist them in maintaining self-control.* For some students, having a fidget (e.g., a squeeze ball, silly putty) can help them focus their extra energy on a prosocial activity, rather than on bothering their classmates. For students who display restlessness, it can be helpful to allow them to stand up or move around (if it helps them stay on task).
 - *Limit distractions in the class and school setting.* Some helpful ways to limit distractions for students are to provide a quiet place for homework, seat easily distractible students close to you, and keep easily distractible students away from doors, windows, cubby areas or pencil sharpeners.
- **Advocate for students to visit a mental health professional, if needed:** If symptoms become overwhelming, it may be important for students to visit a mental health professional to help alleviate their symptoms and identify coping strategies that work for them. School professionals can share referral information with students and their families about options for mental health treatment at school or in the local community.