

Suggestions for Assessing Emotional Disturbance and Behavioral Disorders

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When assessing students with behavioral and emotional concerns, IDEA and the Utah Special Education Rules indicate that team members must examine the marked degree and adverse impact of the student's condition on his or her educational performance over a long period of time. It is ludicrous and inappropriate to start the assessment process by seeking ways to identify behaviors in order to exclude a student from specialized services. The following "best practice" assessment guidelines suggest a starting point for assessment teams that lead to a comprehensive review of factors associated with a child's social and emotional functioning.

Best practices in assessment

Archival records review. School archival records document a student's school history, academic and social performance and interventions that the school has attempted. The first step after a referral is made should be a review of the student's records.

Walker and Severson (1990) developed the Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD) system to screen students at risk for both externalizing and internalizing behavior disorders in school. The SSBD is robust in degrees of reliability and validity in differentiating between typical students and students with emotional disturbance (Walker et al., 1990).

Key indicators: One or more of the following (a) attended two or more elementary schools during his or her school career, (b) 10 or more absences during the academic year, (c) below the 40th percentile on standardized achievement test, (d) retained in one or more grades, (e) two or more narrative comments in records that are of a pejorative nature, and (f) three or more discipline contacts with school administration with written documentation of the reason for office referral.

Behavior Checklists. Parent and teacher versions of major checklists, such as the BASC (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992) and CBCL (Achenbach, 2003) should be completed. If the student is old enough, he or she should complete a student version of the checklist

as well. Caution should be used in interpreting the student's self-report since students with emotional disturbance may not perceive themselves as having the difficulties others perceive them as having. In reviewing the results of the checklists, attention should be given to both externalizing and internalizing behaviors.

Key indicators: One or more of the following (a) T-scores ≥ 65 and (b) highest rating selected on critical items of the checklist such as, "Is in trouble with the police" and "Says 'I want to kill myself.'" [CBCL] (BASC; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992).

Observations. Before conducting a behavioral observation, determine specific behaviors that are problematic in the educational setting. In addition to any unique behaviors, attend to common behavioral problems such as noncompliance and off-task behavior. It is suggested that at least three separate observations of the student should be conducted across different activities and times of day (e.g., individual seat-work, group instruction, and interactive activities). The degree to which the behavior reflects the student's typical behavior in the setting should be elicited from person(s) in charge of the activity (i.e. teacher, playground supervisor). It is optimal to use partial interval recording for most behaviors as this method lends itself well to comparisons. Compare the target student with same sex peers. This allows the observer to determine reliably whether, and to what degree, the student is demonstrating individual problematic behaviors or whether there are classroom or school management problems.

Key indicators: One or more of the following (a) Less than 50% occurrence for off task behavior and (b) 50% or less compliance with teacher/adult directions.

Interviews. Interviews should be conducted with the student, parent, and teacher. Regardless of the format (structured or semi-structured interview), it is always important to address any results of concern from the records review, checklists, and observations completed prior to the interview. Interviewing fundamentals should be observed, including explanations of confidentiality and the evaluation process. Given the sensitive nature of evaluations for emotional disturbance, gratitude for the interviewee's participation in the process should be expressed. Much information may be acquired by asking all interviewees about the student's strengths and weaknesses. When conducting an interview, specific information about previous interventions is essential, including duration, problems, fidelity and success.

Key indicators: Substantial evidence of one or more of the following: (a) aggression, (b) noncompliance, (c) acting-out behaviors, (d) social competency concerns, (e) depression, (f) anxiety, (g) developmentally inappropriate fears, and (h) school avoidance.

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Assessing ALL Students: Utah's Alternate Assessment

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Legislative requirements such as the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 105-17, 1997 [IDEA 97]) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have caused teachers and administrators across the country to take a closer look at the assessment of students with disabilities. Current mandates require ALL students to participate in statewide testing. Does that mean that all students must take the end of level CRT? Certainly we are all aware that the student population is incredibly diverse and that not all students will be appropriately assessed with the same instrument. Utah's Alternate

Assessment (UAA) is part of the Utah Performance Assessment System for Students (U-PASS), and was created to bridge this gap in the assessment of students with the most severe cognitive disabilities.

The IEP team is empowered to determine how students with disabilities will participate in the current assessment system. That may include any accommodations or modifications that a student may need for a grade level assessment. In order to be eligible to take the UAA, the student must have an IEP that documents and **reflects** the need for an alternate assessment because he/she is unable to participate in any other component of U-PASS.

The UAA has recently been revised to not only meet the federal requirements, but to provide valid information that can be used to improve the outcomes of educational programs for students. The changes in the UAA help focus efforts on two components: standardization and individualization. Direct observations of student performance are recorded and measured against standardized performance criteria in the areas of Language Arts and Math. The UAA consists of approximately 100 tasks in these two areas. IEP teams will select one task from the Language Arts area and one task from the Math area that represent part of the student's educational programming in the IEP. In the spring assessment period, teachers will measure three different trials of student performance by observing skills embedded in naturally occurring routines in natural settings. Since each task is individualized and standardized, there is no question about what level of proficiency the student has reached after the performance has been recorded.

By creating an assessment with standardized tasks, teachers and administrators will be able to make meaningful comparisons across classrooms, schools, and districts. As with most assessments, the UAA is a representative piece of data that can be used to guide and inform teachers and parents. Information gained from this assessment can be used to address changes that may need to occur in a student's programming, in a school or district's professional development, or possibly help to shape a school or district's curriculum needs. The UAA is available on the webpage at: www.usoe.k12.ut.us/sars/

Academic assessment. It is recommended that assessment of academic achievement include multiple measures (formal and informal). Formal assessment measures (i.e., Woodcock Johnson-III Achievement Battery, Stanford Achievement Test) are indexed to the student's normative reference group and yield essential academic reference points. Informal measures facilitate comparisons to the classroom community and can assess individual student growth (comparison of individual to self over time). In the interest of efficiency, it is recommended that literacy (reading and writing) and study/organizational skills are the initial focus of academic assessment. Suggested informal assessments include, (a) curriculum based measurement of reading and writing skills, (b) work sample review, (c) review of homework completion rate, and (d) desk/work space organization analysis.

Key indicators: One or more of the following: (a) reading 2 levels below expected for age and grade, (b) literacy skills ranked in the bottom 20% of the environment/class, (c) failure to make adequate progress academically over time, (d) low (i.e. <60%) completion or accuracy of assigned work, (e) organizational skill deficiencies, (f) academic performance (i.e., grades) in the bottom 20% of the class and (g) below the 40th percentile on formal assessment.

Social skills assessment

Assessing social skills should be done from the parent's, teacher's, and student's perspectives. Rating scales such as the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence (Walker & McConnell, 1988), and School Social Behavior Scales (SSBS) (Merrell, 1993) are recommended. Additional strategies (e.g. sociometrics) can be time consuming but may be very helpful in determining how a student is perceived by his or her peers (Sheridan, 1995).

Key indicators: One or more of the following: (a) significantly low subscale or total scale scores in any of the social skills domains and (b) consider individual item responses that indicate the student consistently fails to perform adequately in specific areas such as in making friends, receiving criticism, controls temper, and requests permission to leave the house.

Functional behavior assessment (FBA). A FBA is recommended for behavioral concerns defined during the evaluation. If the behaviors of concern are complex in nature, a formal FBA assessment should be completed (O'Neill et al, 1997). If the behavioral concerns are less complex, the use of an informal (i.e. A-B-C chart) or computer assisted FBA program (i.e. Functional Assessment and Intervention Planning {FAIP}) can suggest possible functions of the problem behavior and provide recommended intervention. Both informal and formal processes require collaboration with important adults in the student's environment. Behavioral interventions should result from the FBA, regardless of whether the student is IDEA eligible.

Key indicators: One or more of the following: (a) evidence that problematic behaviors are not an appropriately adaptive response to a given environment (b) identification of specific antecedents such as transitions from one activity to another, academic "down" time and associations with problematic peers, and (c) indication of consequence-type indicators that address the impact of peer attention, avoidance of specific adults or academic subjects/tasks, and specific outcomes associated with in-school or out of school suspension. ■