



Tips on Dealing with Tics in the Classroom

Overview:

Teachers: if a student has tics, he or she may need some accommodations. Although any type of activity may be affected, be especially alert to tic interference during reading, writing, and math work. Also be sensitive to any reluctance to speak aloud if there are vocal tics and any peer teasing associated with tics. Asking the child's parents, the treating professionals, your colleagues, and the child about what has worked for the child in the past or what might work can help reduce some of the frustration of trial-and-error.

Parents: at the beginning of your journey, there is a tendency to want every single possible accommodation for your child. Sometimes, we may go too far in terms of eliminating anything even remotely stressful or challenging. Only give your child accommodations that s/he needs and that actually make a difference. In other words, don't just assume that your child needs accommodations and don't just assume that any accommodations provided are effective – assess before and after any accommodations.

Finding what are necessary and helpful accommodations is an ongoing process. Let the child's behavior and functioning guide the decision-making process.

Strategies to Consider or Explore:

- Ignore the tics -- in the sense that you don't comment on them publicly at all. Pointing out the student's tics or commenting on them may produce a worsening of the tics.
- Give the student a permanent pass to leave the classroom at his or her discretion to "get the tics" out in private or if the tics are becoming overwhelming. Do not direct or order the student to leave because of the tics, however, as that is essentially punishing the student for tics and will likely make the tics worse and/or lead to emotional or behavioral reactions.
- Provide extended time on reading assignments and handwritten work if the student has eye, head/neck/shoulder, or arm tics.
- Research demonstrates that extended time on testing makes a significant difference for many students with Tourette's. Some students also need testing in a separate location.
- Provide a peer education program if the student is being teased and/or rejected because of the tics. Permission of the student's parents and the student should be obtained before revealing the student's condition to peers.
- If the student reports being teased or taunted, provide added adult supervision in unstructured or less structured settings such as the cafeteria, gym, playground, and school bus.
- If tics are directly interfering with student's ability to receive information, find alternative ways to present the material. If reading becomes too difficult due to eye or neck tics, use books on tape or

have someone read to the student or record the reading for them. Be sensitive, however, to how the student may feel about having someone read to them. For other kinds of learning activities, using multi-sensory, hands-on approaches is often effective. Importantly, some students can still learn during very rough periods if you pitch to their strengths. If the child loves reading and tells you that they don't find it frustrating, let them read -- even if it means you cut back on the productivity demand. There is usually (but not always) something that the student can do to be academically engaged, so be creative.

- If a student has vocal tics, consult with them privately about whether you should call on them to read aloud to class.
- If a student cannot physically write without frustration or limitation due to tics, allow alternative means of production such as keyboarding, tape recording, or use of voice dictation software for older students and/or longer assignments. For younger students, you may need to use a scribe.
- If tics are frustrating or exhausting the student, break assignments up into shorter 'chunks,' with breaks and opportunities for movement or discharging tics between periods of work.
- Some settings may be stressful for the student. Students with loud or frequent vocal tics may find study hall, the library, or assemblies especially stressful since they will feel under greater self-imposed or other-suggested demands to "keep quiet." Under such conditions, the student should probably be permitted to excuse him/herself from that activity or setting.
- Students with TS frequently do not want to be "front and center" where others may stare at them as they tic. Consult with the student as to where they'd feel most comfortable. Seating near the door for graceful and unobtrusive exit works best for some students, but for others, distractions from noise in the hall may be problematic.
- Consider any medication effects in scheduling the student's academic classes.
- If the student is intellectually gifted, allow them to work ahead during periods when their tics have waned or remitted significantly; this will reduce any stress about falling behind during times when their tics are in a worsening (or "waxing") cycle.
- Do NOT punish a student for a tic as it won't help "teach" the student anything other than they are being punished for what they can't help. If a student's tics impose on others, problem solve collaboratively with the student what they can do to be considerate and protective of their peers and teachers.
- Model acceptance. If the students see you making faces or being distracted by the student's tics, they will react, too.
- If the student has touching tic or compulsion, or large motor tics involving extremities, allow a larger "buffer zone" around them to reduce the stress for everyone. It may be helpful to have a second desk or library carrel in the room that the student can work at when tics are bad -- a screened area will make it easier (but not necessarily easy) to concentrate, particularly if they know their tics are not being observed. For really intense waxing cycles, the student may feel more comfortable if you allow them to go find an empty room to work in. Do not insist that they go elsewhere, however, as that is tantamount to punishing them or rejecting them for what they can't help.
- If tics are physically distressing or uncomfortable, allow the student to work in whatever position they feel comfortable.
- Encourage the student to let you know what supports he or she feels are needed to work around the tics. Recognizing the student's struggle and joining with them in a collaborative approach can make a world of difference.