



Council for
Children with
Behavioral
Disorders

COUNCIL FOR CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS
A Division of The Council for Exceptional Children

DRAFT
POSITION PAPER
ON TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITION OF
EMOTIONAL OR BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS *

by

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Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders. (October, 2000). Draft Position Paper On Terminology And Definition Of Emotional Or Behavioral Disorders. Reston, VA: Author, A Division of the Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA.

* A related draft paper from the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders is also available:

Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders. (August, 2000). Draft Position Paper On Identification and Verification of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders. Reston, VA: Author, A Division of the Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the position of the Council for Children With Behavioral Disorders (CCBD) related to the terminology and definition of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. It is intended to replace in part four earlier CCBD position papers that dealt with these topics:

CCBD. (May, 1985). Substituting "Behaviorally Disordered" For "Seriously Emotionally Disturbed" As A Descriptive Term For Children And Youth Handicapped By Behavior. Behavioral Disorders, 10(3), 167-174. Prepared By: Sharon L. Huntze, University Of Missouri-Columbia.

CCBD. (April, 1985). Response To: The Department Of Education's 1985 "Special Study On Terminology - Comprehensive Review And Evaluation Report". Unpublished. Prepared By: Sharon L. Huntze, University Of Missouri-Columbia.

CCBD. (November, 1987), Definition And Identification Of Students With Behavioral Disorders. Behavioral Disorders, 13(1), 9-19. Prepared By: Carl R. Smith, Buena Vista College, Storm Lake, Iowa.

CCBD. (May 1990). Provision Of Service To Children With Conduct Disorders. Behavioral Disorders, 15 (3), 180-189. Prepared By: Russ Skiba, Indiana University.

Abstract

The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders supports the deletion of the term “seriously” from the terminology used to describe children with emotional and behavioral disorders in state and local policy, as has already occurred in federal policy, and supports the use of the terminology “emotional or behavioral disorders” to replace the term “emotionally disturbed” in federal, state and local policy. In addition, the Council also supports the adoption in federal, state, and local regulations of the definition developed by the National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition, as published in the U.S. Department of Education “notice of inquiry” in the *Federal Register* (February 10, 1993).

POSITION PAPER ON TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITION OF EMOTIONAL OR BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS

The latest reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes a provision to drop the term “serious” from the terminology, “serious emotional disturbance,” the special education category for children with emotional or behavioral problems. The emotional disturbance (ED) definition itself, however, remains unchanged and continues to include five problematic criteria for eligibility (Forness, 1992a, b). The first is an “inability to learn,” which often confuses the ED definition with the learning disability (LD) definition. The second is an “inability to build or maintain satisfactory relationships with teachers or peers” (i.e., social adjustment problems); but the definition subsequently confuses matters by excluding children whose problems are considered merely “social maladjustment.” These and the other three criteria (i.e., inappropriate types of behavior or feelings,” “pervasive mood of unhappiness,” and “tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears”) also require that a child be classified as a “type” before he or she can be found eligible. These types are based on a single study done more than 40 years ago in the Los Angeles County schools by the late Eli M. Bower and are no longer reflective of more recent educational research or clinical diagnoses (Duncan, Forness & Hartsough, 1995; McGinnis & Forness, 1988).

Many children with difficulties in social adjustment, furthermore, are excluded from the ED category because their problems are considered to be “merely” conduct disorders or discipline problems. Their actual underlying emotional disorders, such as depression or anxiety, may not be recognized or identified as such, because “social maladjustment” becomes an automatic exclusion. Most epidemiological studies suggest that symptoms of conduct disorders are inextricably woven into symptoms of other psychiatric disorders such that very few children

are referred to special education with “pure” conduct disorders (Forness, Kavale & Lopez, 1993; Forness, Kavale, King & Kassari, 1994). In a classic study on school programs for children with emotional disturbance (Knitzer, Steinberg, & Fleisch, 1990), no significant difference was found in the percent of children served between those states using the term *behavioral disorders* in their definition (N = 10) and those using only *emotional disturbance* (N = 13). Some 29 states no longer exclude children with “social maladjustment” as the federal definition requires, presumably because of the impossibility of reliably distinguishing “social” from “emotional” maladjustment (Cline, 1990).

Previous Work on Terminology and Definition

As an early response to these and related issues, the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (CCBD), a subdivision of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), published position papers on terminology and identification (CCBD, 1985a, 1985b, 1987). CCBD also subsequently approved and published a draft terminology and definition paper using the term “emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD)” (CCBD, 1989). This draft was submitted to the National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition, composed of 30 different education, mental health, advocacy, and parent associations (Forness, 1988). In January and June of 1990, the Coalition’s task force on the EBD definition (composed of 20 members of the coalition) met in Washington, DC, and further reviewed and revised the EBD draft. This draft then was submitted to a meeting of the full coalition in October of 1990 and approved more or less in its current form. A full discussion of the new terminology and definition was subsequently published (Forness & Knitzer, 1992).

In 1991 and 1992, there were several meetings and phone contacts between members of the Coalition and staff members of relevant House and Senate subcommittees. There were likewise similar contacts with a wide range of other stakeholders in education and mental health,

including members from associations or groups representing ethnically diverse populations such as NAACP and La Raza. The terminology and definition change was originally scheduled as an amendment to pending legislation in the summer of 1992, and quick passage was expected. The National School Boards Association objected, however, at the last minute, (National School Boards Association, 1992). This was mainly due to fears that large numbers of children previously unserved in this category would now have to be included in special education at great cost to states and local districts. It should be pointed out, however, that a recent study, comparing the current ED and the proposed EBD definitions to determine risk for an increase in the identification of students in this category, the authors found the analog of the *proposed* definition to identify a more appropriately limited sample of children who were also more likely to have already been placed in special education (Cluett et al, 1998; Forness et al, 1998).

It is clear, moreover, that the proposed EBD terminology and definition has been “vetted” in a historically unique process and that it enjoys widespread support in the special education and mental health communities. It is also clear that families of children with this disorder have both been included in this process and were supportive of its outcome. Given the opposition of NSBA, however, Congress subsequently decided to compromise in 1993 by not passing an amendment for the new definition but instead by directing the U.S. Department of Education to publish a “notice of inquiry” in the *Federal Register* (February 10, 1993) asking for comments on the advisability of changing to the new EBD definition and terminology in IDEA.

Approximately 1,200 responses were received, among the largest number of responses ever received from such a notice of inquiry. As of this writing, the report analyzing these responses has not yet been submitted to Congress for its action; but two thirds of responses were reported to be favorable. In fact, Sachs (1999) states “On January 28th, 1998 the Council for Exceptional Children complained that OSERS did not provide a report of their findings and formally

requested that OSERS adopt the National Coalition proposed definition of EB/D (p.81).

The EBD Definition

The text of the EBD definition as published in the notice of inquiry is as follows:

(1) The term “emotional or behavioral disorder” means a disability that is characterized by behavioral or emotional responses in school programs so different from appropriate age, cultural, or ethnic norms that the responses adversely affect educational performance, including academic, social, vocational or personal skills; more than a temporary, expected response to stressful events in the environment; consistently exhibited in two different settings, at least one of which is school-related; and unresponsive to direct intervention applied in general education, or the condition of a child is such that general education interventions would be insufficient.

The term includes such a disability that co-exists with other disabilities.

The term includes a schizophrenic disorder, affective disorder, anxiety disorder, or other sustained disorder of conduct or adjustment, affecting a child if the disorder affects educational performance as described in paragraph (1) (*Federal Register*, February 10, 1993, p. 7938)

There are a number of major advantages and improvements in this new terminology and definition. Not only does it focus directly on the child’s responses in school settings and places this response in the context of appropriate age, ethnic, or cultural norms; but it also has four qualifying statements that ensure that only children who appropriately qualify will be eligible. The four additional qualifying statements (a) indicate that EBD is more than a temporary, expected response to stressors and would persist even with individualized (Prereferral) interventions; (b) require eligibility to be based on multiple sources of data gathered in more than one school setting; (c) indicate that EBD can coexist with other disabling conditions; and (d) include a listing of examples of some (but not all) current mental health diagnoses that *could* make a student eligible if educational performance is also impaired, thus allowing for greater coordination with other agencies that can provide related services in addition to the school.

The proposed definition has several other advantages over the current ED definition in that the EBD definition (a) emphasizes a two-step diagnostic process determining symptoms and

impairment that is essentially similar to that for the LD and mental retardation (MR) categories; (b) includes ethnic or cultural considerations in identification; (c) stresses the need for multiple sources of case data; (d) enhances the possibility of early identification and intervention; (e) lists examples of clinical diagnoses that *could* create eligibility if educational performance is impaired, so as to facilitate referrals to and from mental health, but does not necessarily require such diagnoses; and (f) does not require meaningless distinctions between social and emotional maladjustment, distinctions that often waste diagnostic resources when it is already clear that serious problems exist.

Conclusion

It should be noted that Head Start has adopted a version of the EBD definition in its revised disability regulations (*Federal Register*, January 21, 1993, p. 5501). Since Head Start is perhaps the largest single referral source for children identified for special education in the early years, this represents a significant source of support for the new definition (Forness & Finn, 1993). It has also been widely adopted as a generic school definition of emotional or behavioral disorders (Kauffman 1997; Nelson & Pearson, 1991). In fact, Alabama, Louisiana, and Minnesota have either adopted the entire definition or adapted the EBD into their current state rules and regulations. Of several challenges that continue to face special education of children with emotional or behavioral disorders, the problem of eligibility is among the most pressing (Kauffman et al, 1991). As each state now reconsiders changing its existing terminology and definition in light of the latest IDEA reauthorization, the EBD terminology and definition takes on added significance.

Summary of Positions

In summary, CCBD supports the following:

1. The deletion of the term “seriously” from the terminology used to describe children with emotional and behavioral disorders in state and local policy, as has already occurred in federal policy.
2. The use of the term “emotional or behavioral disorders” to replace the term “emotionally disturbed” in federal, state and local policy.
3. To have federal, state and local policies adopt the definition of “emotional or behavioral disorders” as published in U.S. Department of Education “notice of inquiry” in the *Federal Register* (February 10, 1993). Specifically CCBD supports the inclusion in federal, state and local definitions of language which:
 - a. Accounts for differences based on age, cultural or ethnic norms;
 - b. Requires adverse educational performance including academic, social, vocational or personal skills;
 - c. Requires more than a temporary, expected response to stressful events in the environment;
 - d. Requires emotional or behavioral responses consistently exhibited in two different settings, at least one of which is school-related
 - e. Requires emotional or behavioral responses that are unresponsive to direct intervention applied in general education, or the condition of a child is such that general education interventions would be insufficient;
 - f. Includes such a disability that co-exists with other disabilities;
 - g. Includes a schizophrenic disorder, affective disorder, anxiety disorder, or other sustained disorder of conduct or adjustment, affecting a child if the disorder affects

educational performance.

The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders along with numerous other organizations in the National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition believes that these changes in terminology and definition are in the best interest of the students, their families, and the schools and agencies attempting to serve them.

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