

Dear Teacher:

If you have a student with Tourette's syndrome (TS) in your classroom, you are now and forever after one of the most influential people in that child's life. Think about this for a moment. This is true whether the child is a model student, or one who exhibits varying degrees of attention, learning, or behavioral problems. This is because a child with TS lives in constant fear of being betrayed by his own body. He feels only a limited sense of control. Quite naturally, his growing sense of self-esteem will be at risk, and he will rely more heavily than the average child on others in his environment for positive feedback and for reassurance and encouragement. As his teacher, you are that most influential person.

It is often reported to us by parents that the school environment is where their children experience the most anguish and frustration associated with TS. Problems arise and snowball when teachers do not understand and appropriately respond to the sometimes baffling behaviors accompanying TS. One major source of misunderstanding is not realizing that symptoms will increase and decrease in intensity over time in a cyclic manner. As a result, some days a student will be able to perform better academically and possibly, behaviorally, than on other days. This does not necessarily reflect a lack of motivation on the part of the child, or a wish to be defiant in his behavior. Remember that TS is a complex disorder of the nervous system. This may be the one child in a million who does have an answer to our rhetorical question, "You knew this last week; why can't you do this work as quickly or as well as you did then?" This will admittedly be a challenge to planning. Our best advice is to allow both you and the student all the flexibility you need on a daily basis.

Please keep in close contact with the child's parents. They are often the true "experts" in TS. They can supply you pertinent information about the child's medication and its effects, as well as little-known facts about that child's learning style, which pamphlets cannot adequately explain. The child will benefit to the maximum degree if you and his parents are allies, working together for his positive growth and development.

Although TS is a very complex disorder with varying types of disabling symptoms, often the most handicapping aspect is the lack of understanding and acceptance by society. Since school is the main occupation of children, this child's "society" may be only as large as your classroom. The single most effective effort that you can make is to create an atmosphere of acceptance in your classroom. Other children often mock TS symptoms and tease unmercifully. Please don't allow this in your school. It is our experience that once classmates are informed of the involuntary nature of TS, and are provided with an atmosphere accepting of all students as unique individuals, then everyone benefits. Teachers experience much less frustration and a peak satisfaction that comes with knowing they have taught their students much more than academics.

It would be almost impossible to over-emphasize your importance at this time in this child's long-term development. A bad year in school can do harm to his sense of self-confidence and self-esteem that can take literally years to overcome, if ever. We've seen it happen. Conversely, a successful school year can bring a child a new sense of worth and hopefulness for the future. Remember, dealing with TS symptoms can be a frustrating experience for you but not nearly as frustrating as it is for the child. It can also be an immensely rewarding experience when you realize one day that you and everyone else in your classroom has forgotten that one of the students has TS. Then you will know that you have addressed the challenges commendably and admirably. You can rest assured, then, that you have had an immeasurable positive impact on that child's course of future growth.

If at any time during the year you need support, advice, feedback, or resources, contact the Tourette Syndrome Association of Texas at 281-238-8096. Wishing you the very best in terms of a successful, productive and rewarding year!

Tourette Association - Texas Chapter 281-238-8096 <http://TouretteTexas.org> TouretteTexas@aol.com

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