



Managing tics in the classroom

This information explains a little about Tourette syndrome (TS) and shares some tips for managing children with TS in school. We realise that the child with TS may not be the only child in school with special needs but hope that some or all of the following suggestions will be achievable.

What is Tourette syndrome?

Tourette syndrome (TS) is a disorder where motor and vocal tics are the major symptom. TS begins in childhood and has phases where it improves and worsens, both in intensity and in how it presents. In some young people, the tics may not be noticed, while in others, the tics can be quite disturbing and embarrassing. Many children and young people can have a considerable decrease in their symptoms and even remission during adulthood.

What are tics?

A tic can be described as a brief, repetitive, purposeless movement or sound that occur in bouts. They are involuntary but sometimes they can be suppressed or triggered. Motor tics are those that produce movement and vocal or phonic tics are those that produce sound. Tics can either be simple involving one muscle or one sound or they can be complex. Complex tics involve a coordinated movement of a number of muscles or an utterance of a meaningful phrase.

Examples of tics

- Simple motor tics – eye blinking, head jerks, facial grimacing, nose twitching, shoulder shrugs, spitting
- Simple vocal or phonic tics – grunting, squeaking, coughing, whistling, humming
- Complex motor tics – pulling at clothes, touching people or objects, twirling around, self-injurious behaviour
- Complex vocal tics – making animal-like sounds, unusual changes in pitch or volumes, swearing

Tics may appear suddenly and last for a few weeks at a time and then disappear, only to be replaced by a different tic a few weeks or months later. The location of the tic in the body may vary and so may the frequency and severity. This variability may lead parents and teachers to mistakenly conclude that the tics can be controlled. Individuals can have bouts of severe and frequent tics alternating with periods of total or relative remission.

A common view of TS is that people have swearing outbursts, but this only affects about 15 per cent of children. Most children have a combination of vocal and motor tics, which are often noticed when the child is between five and nine years old.



Suggestions for managing a child or young person with tics in the classroom

We realise that the child with TS may not be the only child in school with special needs but hope that some or all of the following suggestions will be achievable.

Arranging the classroom

- Talk to the pupil with tics about the best place to sit. This may be at the side or back of the classroom.
- Allow extra room if the young person has a touching tic or large motor tics involving limb movements.
- See if it is possible for the pupil to leave the classroom briefly to 'let out' the tics.
- About half of children with TS have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). For more ideas, please see our other information sheets

Organising tasks and activities

- If the pupil has a vocal tic, allow them to leave quiet or stressful situations, such as assembly. A gradual increase in attendance at these occasions and an

associated 'reward scheme' could be built into the Individual Education Plan.

- Some tasks might take longer to complete than expected. Break them in to smaller tasks with time for tics in between.
- Gifted pupils should be allowed to move onto the next task once one is completed to make up for the times when tics are worse.
- Tics may interfere with handwriting, so investigate whether alternative methods are possible. These could include using a laptop computer, oral reports, recording onto audiotape, or using a scribe.
- A home-school diary is a good way of keeping tasks organised and communicating with parents regularly.

Discipline

- Ignore the tics as much as possible.
- Talk to parents about behaviour management at home and try to follow the same guidelines.
- Extra supervision may be needed outside of lessons, for instance, at lunchtimes or during PE lessons.

A final word

Partnership between teachers, parents and other professionals involved in the pupil's care is the key. Consistent messages need to be given to the pupil at school and at home. Working with a pupil with tics can be challenging, but managing the pupil's behaviour so that he or she can work towards full potential can be very rewarding too.

Compiled by the Tourette Syndrome Clinic in collaboration with the Child and Family Information Group.

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