



Tips on Dealing with Tics in the Classroom

Preface:

Teachers: do not neglect to consult with previous teachers, the student's parents, and the outside treating professionals for ideas about what works best for your student, and do consult with the student in a collaborative fashion. Remember that you, the teacher, only see the 'tip of the iceberg' when it comes to what the student is experiencing internally.

While a particular tip listed below may seem like a great idea, it may backfire for any one student, so keep that in mind and individualize these tips.

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 what s/he needs. If you take away everything, are you really preparing them for the future? And do consider that the more different you make them from their peers, the more difficulty they may experience socially.

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

Impact of Tics:

Tics can impact learning and performance directly and indirectly. The most commonly reported problems are that eye tics and head/neck tics directly interfere with reading and can be very frustrating for the student. Eye, head/neck, and arm tics also directly interfere with handwritten work for a number of students with tics. The indirect impact of tics may be harder to detect but is no less important: any tic can distract the student from concentrating as they become aware of the need to tic building up, severe or frequent tics can cause pain, frustration, and irritability or weepiness, and/or vocal tics can lead the student to withdraw from class discussions or make them embarrassed to read aloud. Additionally: tics can lead to peer teasing or fear of peer rejection.

Tips:

When it comes to the tics of TS, the author's motto is "find a way or make a way." Work around the tics however you have to to deliver the curriculum. Keep the focus on learning, be flexible as to the how and means of demonstrating understanding. Keep a positive outlook as you remind yourself and the student that however bad a tic seems, this too shall pass.

Here are some accommodation ideas to consider:

- Ignore the tics -- in the sense that you don't comment on them publicly at all. Pointing out the student's tics tends to produce worse ticcing.
- Give the student a permanent pass so that he can leave the classroom at his discretion if he needs to "get the tics" out in private or if the tics are becoming overwhelming. Two surveys have both reported that this accommodation was very helpful. Do not ask the student to leave because of the tics, however, as this will be perceived as humiliating and may lead to resentment and/or demoralization.
- Time pressure is a major stressor for many students with tics. Extend time on reading assignments and handwritten work if the student has eye, head/neck/shoulder, or arm tics.
- Extended time on testing and testing in a separate location to reduce stress. Be sure to assess whether the student really needs the separate location or if she will become angry at being sent from the classroom. In addition to extending time on tests, you may need to have answers recorded in alternative ways (such as a scribe), and you may need to provide a reader for tests. Consideration needs to be given to whether the test is assessing reading skills (in which case, such an accommodation may defeat some of the purpose of the test), or if the purpose is to assess knowledge of some other content area.
- Peer education, 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, but you may encounter a situation in which no matter what you try, nothing seems to really enable the student to participate in the planned activity. 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. If reading 'settles' them and they can absorb what they're reading, then while the rest of the class is listening to a story, let them go off and read it to themselves if they find it easier to concentrate that way. Similarly, if they can't "get into" a film or lesson because their tics keep distracting them, can they focus if they're reading or working on a computer with exciting graphics? There is usually (but not always) something that the student can do to be academically engaged, so be creative. By helping the student find a way to function even during any rough periods, you will help them maintain their self-esteem and will model problem-solving skills for them that will benefit them in life.
- If a student has frequent vocal tics, you may need to provide written copies of all instructions or assignments given orally, as they may not be able to hear you or process and remember your instructions.
- 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 has tics that prevent participation in a particular class activity (such as lab), team the student up with partner who will do the actual "hands-on" part of the lab while the student observes

and serves another function in the activity. Do not assume, however, that because the student has arm tics that they will necessarily have a problem conducting a lab where arm/hand control is required -- even if they are ticcing more in anticipation. The intense focus required by the lab itself may lead to automatic tic suppression. The Canadian surgeon, Mort Doran, MD, is frequently ticcy, but when he operates, he does not tic. Once the intense concentration is broken, don't be surprised if the tics come back full force (and then some).

- 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.
- If work needs to be 'chunked' due to limited endurance, it is helpful to fold worksheets or use masks so that the student only sees one small portion of the assignment at a time. Contract with the student as to how much they will do before taking a short break. But be careful: some teachers think they are doing the student a favor by "encouraging" them to do just a bit more or stay in the classroom "just a little longer" before taking a break. Remember that the student is learning to accept and cope with what may be a chronic, lifelong disorder. If we want them to learn to monitor themselves so that they realize when they need to take a break, then it is invalidating to tell them that they don't need a break when they're telling you that they do. Even though it may not appear this way, very few students actually take advantage or use the TS as an excuse to leave the classroom to any great extent. Assume that your student wants to be in class and functioning like other students and that if s/he's asking to leave, s/he's probably feeling that she really needs to get out of there.
- Some students seem to be in "sensory overload" or overstimulation in some settings. The cafeteria may be too noisy, and hence stressful, for them. Similarly, gym may be too stimulating and the student may experience distress if they feel that they won't be able to control themselves. Helping the student recognize when they are in situations that overtax their self-control is important, and in my opinion, the student shouldn't be forced to stay in a situation if they are telling you that they can't handle it.
- Some settings may be temporarily 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.
- Preferential seating: 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.
- If tics are really severe, and if breaking the work up into smaller chunks and extending time is not sufficient, temporarily reduce the workload in terms of performance demands.
- Consider any medication effects in scheduling the student's academic classes. Tics tend to worsen as the day wears on, so schedule the most demanding classes for the morning. But also consider the student's medication schedule -- consult with the parents, student, and former teachers about what the student's most productive time of day tends to be.
- The mental energy spent suppressing tics may fatigue the student. During periods of tic exacerbation

(waxing cycles), alternate quiet activities with activities that allow more movement, unless the student tells you that another strategy would be more helpful to her. During waxing cycles, you may also need to extend time on homework and/or reduce homework because the student will be fatigued from the increased ticcing and the stress of homework may lead to outbursts or intense frustration in the home.

- If the student is intellectually gifted, allow them to work ahead during waning periods; this will reduce any stress about falling behind during waxing cycles.
- For younger students, if the student is really struggling, integrate the curriculum around areas of special interest or otherwise teach to the student's interests; when students are constructively engrossed or engaged, the tics ease up.
- 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. Note: discipline or behavior interventions should be covered in the student's IEP (individualized education program).
- Did you ever fantasize about becoming a model? Well, this is your chance, because your student needs you to model acceptance.
- 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 of having to worry about anyone getting hit or feeling nervous. 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 creating problems with peers, allow (but do not force) the older student to leave class a few minutes early to avoid hallway crowds and situations in which they will be under more stimulation and stress.
- If tics are physically distressing or uncomfortable, allow the student to work in whatever position they feel comfortable.
- Allow and/or encourage young students to learn the technique of highlighting or using something to keep track of where they are in their reading so that they can relocate their spot more quickly if "pulled off" by tics.