



Providing Mental and Behavioral Health Support for Students with IDD

Introduction

Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are more likely to experience mental and behavioral health challenges than students without IDD. These challenges are often missed because their behaviors may be misunderstood or attributed only to their disability (Pinals et al., 2022). In addition, students with IDD may be underrepresented within the realm of mental health and behavioral wellness in comparison to students without IDD because of societal barriers such as lack of access to healthcare (ASHA, 2020).

This tip sheet will help educators understand:

- what mental and behavioral health conditions are;
- what warning signs to look for in students with IDD; and
- what support can be used in the classroom.

Key Words

Below are some key words and definitions related to mental and behavioral health. It can be helpful to know and understand these terms when supporting students with IDD and co-occurring mental and behavioral health concerns.

Mental and Behavioral Health: Key Terms and Definitions

Key Word	Definition
Behavioral Health	An important part of overall health. It looks at how everyday habits and behaviors affect lifestyle choices and mental and physical health. Behavioral health includes prevention, treatment, and support to improve mental health and related conditions (CDC, 2025).
Intellectual/ Developmental Disability	A group of conditions that affect how a student learns, moves, communicates, behaves, and/or interacts with others and the world around them (ASHA, 2020).
Mental Health	Emotional, psychological, and social well-being that affects how a person thinks, feels, and acts and influences how a person handles stress, relates to others, and makes choices (NAMI, 2026).
Antecedent – Behavior – Consequence (ABC) Data (https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/bp/cresource/q1/p02/)	A way to understand behavior by looking at antecedents (what happens before the behavior), behaviors (what the person does), and consequences (what happens after the behavior).

Importance

Importance of Mental and Behavioral Health Among Students with IDD

Understanding behavior in students with IDD can be challenging. However, it is important to remember that all behaviors have a purpose. Students may act in certain ways to:

- communicate something;
- avoid something;
- get attention;
- get a preferred item; or
- meet a sensory need.

Because students with IDD may have difficulty communicating or expressing emotions, their behaviors can give important clues about their mental health. Teachers need to recognize early warning signs so students can access support quickly and efficiently.

Students with IDD are often more vulnerable to mental and behavioral health conditions due to communication differences, social stigmatization, and differences with self-management. The table below provides more information about how these three concepts may impact students with IDD.

Communication, Social, and Self-Management Challenges in Students with IDD

Communication Barriers	Social Stigmatization	Self-Management
Students with IDD often experience difficulties in language, reading, writing, reasoning, and memory. These differences can make it difficult to communicate their emotions or seek help effectively, which can limit their ability to express emotions and effectively advocate for their needs (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).	Students with IDD often experience communication differences. These differences can increase the risk of social exclusion, particularly in school settings, and may negatively affect mental and behavioral health (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).	Students with IDD may have trouble with self-management. As a result, these students may face difficulties adapting to change or unplanned experiences. This can result in emotional dysregulation, anxiety, or worry when not managed (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Warning Signs to Consider

The following include some examples of how mental and behavioral health difficulties might present for students with IDD. This is not an exhaustive list, so it's important to consider each student individually. If a student demonstrates any of these warning signs, notify your school's mental health professional or school administrator.

- Significant change in presentation of student behavior from baseline
Example: increased or change in intensity, frequency, or duration of a behavior
 - Difficulties interfere with the student's daily routine
 - Difficulties are present across settings and persist for at least 2 weeks
- If a student develops behavior that is dangerous to themselves or others, it is important to seek help immediately from a school-based mental health professional or school administrator.

Specific Conditions

The following are common mental health conditions often seen with students with IDD and how they may manifest. All symptoms represent behaviors that are inconsistent with the individual's baseline behaviors.

Understanding Mental Health Conditions in Students with IDD

Condition	Manifestation of Condition Among Students with IDD
Anxiety	• Repetitive reassurance, avoidance, anxious anticipation of something that is not inherently dangerous or does not pose a risk to the student • Physical symptoms: stomach aches, headaches, rapid heart rate • Negative self-talk • Worry around change
Depression	• Consistent feelings of sadness • Loss of interest in something that the student used to find enjoyment in • Changes in sleep or eating patterns • Negative changes in school performance • Decreased concentration • Irritability • Increased aggression or self-harm • Suicidal thoughts or comments If a student demonstrates behavior that compromises their safety or the safety of those around them, seek immediate support from the school administrators and/or school mental health professionals.
ADHD	Look for a variety of symptoms: • Dysregulation of where attention should be at a given moment Examples: attending to preferred items when not available, focusing on sensory input (lights, sounds, textures) or objects instead of instruction, • Hyperfixation and difficulty shifting attention Examples: distress or behavioral escalation when changing routine/activities • Distractedness • Fidgeting, trouble sitting still • Frequent interrupting others • Attention/activity level inappropriate for developmental level
Bipolar Disorder	Increased intensity of behavior or mood paired with: • Behavioral escalation • Increase in sensory seeking and/or repetitive behaviors • Decreased need for sleep • Increased energy in activities or routine that consistently do not align with baseline behavior

Next Steps

Below is a suggested plan for teachers to use to support students with IDD and co-occurring mental and behavioral health challenges.

Action Steps to Support Students with IDD and Mental Health Needs

What	How
Collect ABC Data	Monitor progress using ABC data: • Direct Observations • Event Recording • Interval Recording • Time Sampling • Latency Recording Data can be used in the future for a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) , if needed.
Communicate behavior(s) of concern to social worker, school psychologist, nurse, counselor, and/or administrators	Communicate behavior of concern with related service providers/relevant school personnel
Contact caregivers	• Log communication/communication attempts • Share ABC data collected • Communicate target behavior concern • Obtain family perspective if they have noticed similar patterns of behavior at home
Create a safe environment	Maintain consistent and predictable routines in the classroom to ensure student safety: • Incorporate “quiet zones” for student breaks • Provide sensory supports (weighted blankets, fidget toys, headphones, compression) • Provide behavior-specific praise • Offer choices to reinforce sense of control

Summary

Mental and behavioral health challenges may present differently in each individual. It is important to know the baseline behavior of a student with IDD and to be attentive to changes in a student’s behavior. By remaining aware of potential warning signs, collecting data, communicating with school personnel and caregivers, and taking appropriate action, educators can help ensure that students are not overlooked and receive the support they need.

Resources

American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Mental health*. <https://www.apa.org/topics/mental-health>

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.). *Intellectual disability*. <https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/intellectual-disability/>

Introduction to Language and Communication. (n.d.). *Intellectual disabilities*. <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/speds2430/2020-topics/intellectual-disabilities/>

Pinals, D.A., Hovermale, L., Mauch, D., Anacker, L. (2022). Persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the mental health system: Part 1. Clinical considerations. *Psychiatric Services*. 73(3), 313-320. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201900504>.

JFK Partners. (2021, November 11). *Identifying and addressing mental health needs in children and teens with I/DD* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/14YymYvmYGE>

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