

Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in Children: Characteristics, Challenges, and Educational Interventions

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Abstract

Children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) face significant challenges that affect their academic performance, social relationships, and overall development. This paper explores the characteristics of children with EBD, including difficulties in emotional regulation, impaired social skills, and academic struggles. It further discusses common behaviors observed in school settings, such as disruptive actions, withdrawal, and aggression. Drawing from the works of key psychologists including Vygotsky, Ainsworth, and Goleman, the study highlights how emotional intelligence, attachment, and social interactions play vital roles in shaping the experiences of children with EBD. Various intervention strategies are examined, such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Positive Behavior Support (PBS), and social skills training, emphasizing the importance of inclusive educational practices. The paper concludes that collaboration among educators, parents, and mental health professionals is crucial to providing tailored support, fostering resilience, and ensuring that children with EBD can thrive academically and socially.

Keywords

Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, Inclusive Education, Social Skills, Positive Behavior Support, Child Development, Special Needs

1. Introduction

Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) represent a significant area of concern in child development and educational research, as these conditions directly influence students' ability to learn, interact socially, and achieve positive academic outcomes. Globally, it is estimated that between 10% and 15% of school-aged children experience some form of emotional or behavioral difficulty, highlighting the need for effective identification and intervention. In many developing countries, however, limited resources and the absence of specialized support structures exacerbate the challenges faced by children with EBD [1]. For instance, in Nigeria and other African contexts, research on EBD remains relatively underexplored, despite its profound implications for inclusive education and long-term social integration.

Children with EBD often display persistent patterns of disruptive behavior, emotional dysregulation, and social withdrawal, which affect not only their learning outcomes but also the classroom environment. Teachers and schools face the dual challenge of meeting academic goals while managing complex behavioral issues, which can lead to teacher burnout and reduced instructional quality. From a societal perspective, unaddressed EBD contributes to higher dropout rates, social exclusion, and future unemployment, thereby reinforcing cycles of poverty and marginalization.

The importance of addressing EBD is also underscored by global education agendas. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education for all, which necessitates attention to children with special educational needs. Effective intervention strategies, such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Positive Behavioral Support (PBS), and social skills training, provide evidence-based approaches for addressing these challenges. Furthermore, psychological theories such as Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, Ainsworth's attachment theory, and Goleman's emotional intelligence framework provide valuable lenses through which to understand the developmental and educational needs of children with EBD [2].

Despite these frameworks, gaps persist in the literature, particularly within the African educational context. This study aims to contribute to this growing body of knowledge by examining the characteristics, challenges, and strategies for supporting children with EBD, with a focus on promoting inclusive education and holistic child development.

1.1 Defining Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Children with EBD often have trouble managing their emotions and behaviors in ways that are typical for their peers. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), EBD includes conditions like anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and conduct disorders. These disorders can lead to behaviors that significantly differ from those of other children, creating challenges in both academic performance and social interactions.

EBD can show up in various ways, such as intense mood swings, aggressive outbursts, extreme anxiety, and ongoing

feelings of sadness. To diagnose EBD, these emotional and behavioral issues must be consistent and impact multiple areas of the child's life, including home, school, and friendships. Identifying these disorders is critical for providing effective support. For instance, a child with EBD might struggle in situations that others find easy, leading to feelings of frustration and isolation.

1.2 Characteristics of Children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorder

Understanding the characteristics of children with EBD is vital for creating effective support strategies. Here, we discuss three key characteristics:

1.2.1 Challenges in Emotional Regulation

One major characteristic of children with EBD is their difficulty managing emotions. They often experience strong feelings-such as anger, sadness, or anxiety-that can feel overwhelming. For example, a child might have frequent outbursts over minor frustrations, disrupting their own learning and that of others [3].

In a classroom setting, if a child feels frustrated during a tough math lesson, they might throw their books or shout instead of asking for help. These actions create chaos, affecting both the child and their classmates. Over time, such outbursts can lead to negative interactions with peers and teachers, causing other students to avoid the disruptive child. This avoidance can significantly hinder the child's ability to form friendships and develop social skills.

1.2.2 Impaired Social Skills

Another significant trait of children with EBD is difficulty with social skills, complicating their ability to connect with peers. They often struggle to understand social cues, like body language or tone of voice, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. For example, a child might misinterpret a friendly gesture, like a pat on the back, as a threat, leading to aggressive or withdrawn behavior.

Children with EBD may also find it hard to start or maintain conversations. They might interrupt others or not notice when a peer is uninterested in talking. Such behaviors can alienate classmates and hinder friendship formation [4]. Additionally, children with EBD often struggle with empathy, meaning they may not recognize when a friend is upset or in need of support. This lack of social awareness can contribute to feelings of rejection and confusion, worsening their emotional challenges.

1.2.3 Academic Challenges

Children with EBD frequently face significant academic difficulties linked to their emotional and behavioral issues. They may have trouble concentrating, staying motivated, and engaging in lessons, negatively impacting their school performance. For instance, a child with high anxiety might struggle to focus in class, leading to gaps in their understanding and skills.

In the classroom, children with EBD might excel in some subjects while having difficulty in others. This inconsistency can stem from various factors, such as time management challenges, distractions from anxiety, or low motivation due to a negative self-image. These academic challenges can create frustration and hopelessness, leading to a cycle of poor performance. If these issues are not addressed, they can further complicate the emotional struggles these children face, affecting their overall educational experience.

2. Common Behaviors Observed in School Settings

In educational environments, children with EBD often display behaviors that reflect their internal struggles. Here are some common behaviors:

2.1 Disruptive Behavior

Disruptive behaviors are frequently observed in children with EBD. These behaviors can include interrupting lessons, speaking out of turn, or engaging in physical confrontations with peers. For example, a child may throw objects or yell in frustration when faced with a challenging task. Such behaviors create obstacles for teachers and make it difficult to maintain focus in the classroom. The presence of one disruptive child can detract from the educational experiences of others, complicating classroom management [5].

2.2 Withdrawal

Some children with EBD exhibit withdrawal or avoidance behaviors. They might refuse to participate in group activities, sit alone during recess, or hesitate to interact with their peers. This withdrawal often serves as a coping mechanism for anxiety or feelings of inadequacy. For example, during group projects, a child may choose to sit quietly rather than actively participate. This behavior can be misinterpreted by classmates as disinterest, deepening the child's sense of isolation and emotional distress.

2.3 Aggression

Aggressive behavior can manifest in children with EBD in both physical and verbal forms. This includes hitting, kicking, yelling, or using hurtful language. For example, a child may react violently if they feel teased or excluded by

their peers. Such aggressive behaviors often lead to disciplinary actions from teachers and can result in further social isolation. Other students may feel fearful or uncomfortable around an aggressive child, reinforcing feelings of loneliness and frustration.

Table 1 mention and explain visually demonstrate the key differences between children with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) and normal children in terms of emotional, social, and behavioral development.

Table 1. Psychological Development Comparison Table

Aspect	Children with EBD	Children without EBD
Emotional Regulation	Children with EBD often struggle with emotional regulation, experiencing intense emotions like anger and anxiety. For example, they may react explosively to minor frustrations, disrupting school activities. This inability can lead to negative interactions, further isolating them socially and academically. They may also withdraw from anxiety-provoking situations, missing out on social opportunities.	In contrast, children without EBD typically develop effective emotional regulation skills. They learn to identify and communicate their feelings and use coping strategies for stress. These children are often more resilient, can seek help from peers or adults, and generally thrive academically and socially.
Social Skills	Children with EBD often have difficulty developing social skills. They may misinterpret social cues, leading to misunderstandings with peers. For instance, they might view a friendly gesture as a threat, resulting in aggressive behavior. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and rejection, compounding their emotional struggles.	Conversely, children without EBD typically navigate social situations more easily. They recognize social cues and maintain friendships. Their strong communication skills contribute to a sense of belonging, which is crucial for healthy psychological development.
Behavioral	Children with EBD often exhibit	In contrast, children without EBD

Table 2 mention the main challenges faced by children with EBD are emotional imbalance, attachment insecurity, social misunderstandings, and isolation. Children without EBD tend to have stable emotional expression, positive social relationships, and healthy psychological development.

Table 2. Psychological Developments

Aspect	Children with EBD	Children without EBD
Emotional Development	Children with EBD often experience heightened anxiety and distress, struggling to form secure attachments. Frequent emotional outbursts may hinder their ability to build trusting relationships, leading to isolation. Their challenges in processing emotions healthily can result in maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as aggression. This disrupted emotional development can have lasting implications for their future relationships and mental health.	In contrast, children without EBD typically experience healthy emotional development. They learn to navigate emotions and express themselves appropriately. Secure attachments with caregivers provide a foundation for resilience and self-esteem, enabling these children to handle stressors effectively and maintain healthy relationships.
Social Development	Social development for children with EBD often faces significant obstacles. They may struggle to form friendships, leading to feelings of loneliness. Misinterpretations of social cues can result in misunderstandings, further isolating them from peers. For instance, they might see teasing as bullying, provoking defensive responses. This lack of support networks can compound their emotional challenges.	Conversely, children without EBD engage easily in social interactions and establish friendships. They develop effective communication skills and empathy, allowing them to respond to others' needs. Healthy social development contributes to a sense of belonging and security, essential for emotional well-being.

2.4 Implications of Understanding Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Recognizing and understanding emotional and behavioral disorders in children is crucial for fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment [6]. By identifying the characteristics and behaviors associated with EBD, educators, parents, and caregivers can implement tailored strategies to help these children succeed academically and socially [7].

3. Creating a Supportive Environment

Establishing a positive classroom environment is key to helping children with EBD feel valued and understood. This can involve creating structured routines, setting clear behavioral expectations, and using positive reinforcement to encourage desired behaviors. By promoting open communication among teachers, parents, and mental health professionals, a collaborative approach can be developed to support children with EBD.

3.1 Professional Development for Educators

Ongoing professional development for educators is essential for equipping them with the skills and strategies needed to effectively support children with EBD. This training may include behavior management techniques, social-emotional learning, and strategies for fostering emotional regulation [8]. By enhancing their knowledge and skills, educators can create a more inclusive classroom atmosphere that meets the diverse needs of all students.

3.2 Individualized Interventions

Implementing individualized interventions tailored to the specific needs of children with EBD can greatly improve their academic and social outcomes. This may involve developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) that outline specific goals and strategies for addressing each child's unique challenges. These interventions should be regularly reviewed and adjusted based on the child's progress and evolving needs.

3.3 Encouraging Peer Support

Encouraging peer support and fostering positive relationships among classmates can help reduce the isolation often experienced by children with EBD. This can involve implementing buddy systems, cooperative learning activities, and social skills training programs. By promoting a sense of belonging and understanding among peers, educators can help children with EBD feel more connected and less isolated.

3.4 Collaboration with Mental Health Professionals

Collaboration with mental health professionals is vital in addressing the complex needs of children with EBD. Schools can benefit from partnerships with psychologists, counselors, and social workers who specialize in childhood mental health. These professionals can provide valuable insights and support in developing effective interventions and strategies for children exhibiting emotional and behavioral challenges [9].

3.5 Parental Involvement

Engaging parents in the educational process is crucial for supporting children with EBD. Parents can provide valuable information about their child's behavior and emotions at home, helping educators tailor their approaches. Schools can facilitate this by organizing workshops or support groups for parents, where they can learn about EBD and share experiences. This collaboration can empower parents and equip them with strategies to reinforce positive behaviors at home.

4. Building Resilience

Helping children with EBD build resilience is an essential part of supporting their emotional and behavioral growth. Resilience can be fostered through programs that teach coping skills, problem-solving techniques, and emotional regulation strategies. Schools can implement social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula that focus on developing these skills, enabling children to better navigate challenges both in and out of the classroom.

4.1 Advocacy for Policy Changes

Advocating for policy changes that support the mental health needs of children in schools is another critical component of addressing EBD. This advocacy can involve pushing for increased funding for mental health services in schools, creating comprehensive training programs for educators, and ensuring that children have access to the resources they need. By raising awareness of EBD at the policy level, educators and parents can work together to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

4.2 Characteristics of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Emotional and Behavioral Disorders are characterized by patterns of emotional or behavioral responses that deviate significantly from age-appropriate norms. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, EBD includes conditions such as anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and conduct disorder. Children with EBD frequently display excessive fears, aggression, withdrawal, or difficulty forming interpersonal relationships. In classroom environments, they may struggle with following rules, completing assignments, and managing frustration [10]. The persistence and intensity of these behaviours distinguish EBD from temporary emotional reactions experienced by most children.

4.3 Challenges in Educational Settings

Teachers and schools face multiple challenges when supporting students with EBD. These students often exhibit inconsistent academic performance due to emotional instability and impulsivity. High levels of classroom disruption,

absenteeism, and low academic motivation are common. Educators must also navigate social stigma and insufficient institutional support when addressing EBD-related needs. A lack of adequate teacher training further complicates intervention efforts, leading to reactive discipline rather than preventive approaches. Consequently, children with EBD are at higher risk of school suspension, dropout, and later social maladjustment.

4.4 Current Educational Interventions

Modern educational systems have implemented several strategies to assist children with EBD. Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) remain a cornerstone, ensuring that students receive tailored academic and behavioral support. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) frameworks are widely used to reinforce desirable behaviors through structured routines and rewards. School-based counseling services provide emotional regulation and coping skills training, while teacher collaboration with psychologists enhances intervention consistency. Nevertheless, the success of these programs depends on teacher commitment, administrative support, and a culturally responsive educational environment [11].

4.5 Cultural and Contextual Considerations

Cultural perceptions of mental and behavioral disorders greatly influence how EBD is recognized and managed. In many developing countries, including Nigeria, India, and Malaysia, children exhibiting behavioral difficulties are often labeled as 'disobedient' rather than recognized as having an underlying disorder. Limited access to mental health services and societal stigma impede early identification and intervention. Furthermore, educational resources and teacher training vary widely across contexts, leading to inconsistent support for EBD students. Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges local beliefs and values while introducing evidence-based strategies in a respectful and adaptable manner. In multicultural classrooms, educators must understand that expressions of emotion and behavior are shaped by cultural norms, and that effective interventions must consider these contextual differences.

4.6 Evidence-Based Intervention Strategies

Evidence-based interventions play a critical role in managing EBD effectively. Among the most widely researched is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which helps children identify and modify maladaptive thought patterns and behaviors. CBT promotes self-awareness and emotional regulation, contributing to improved classroom behavior and academic performance. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs also provide structured opportunities for students to develop empathy, self-management, and responsible decision-making skills. A meta-analysis by Durlak demonstrated that SEL interventions significantly improve emotional well-being and academic achievement. Mindfulness-based interventions have recently gained attention for reducing impulsivity and stress levels among children with EBD [12]. Additionally, peer-mediated strategies and cooperative learning models foster inclusion, enabling EBD students to learn appropriate social interactions. Teacher consultation and coaching models, such as the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) approach, emphasize teamwork between educators and specialists to reduce classroom conflict and enhance engagement.

Addressing Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in children requires a comprehensive approach that integrates psychological insight, educational innovation, and cultural sensitivity. Future directions in EBD intervention should focus on strengthening teacher training programs, promoting inclusive policies, and expanding school-based mental health services. Policymakers must prioritize early identification frameworks and allocate funding to ensure equal access to psychological care and specialized instruction. Collaboration between educators, parents, psychologists, and policymakers will be essential in building sustainable systems of support. Ultimately, the goal is to enable children with EBD not only to succeed academically but also to achieve emotional stability and lifelong resilience.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the psychological development of children with emotional and behavioral disorders differs significantly from that of their peers without such issues. Children with EBD face considerable challenges in emotional regulation, social skills, and behavioral consistency, often resulting in academic struggles and social isolation. Understanding these differences is crucial for implementing effective educational interventions.

Strategies like Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Positive Behavior Support (PBS), and social skills training create supportive environments that address the unique needs of children with EBD. By fostering emotional regulation, enhancing social competence, and promoting positive behavior, educators can help these children thrive both academically and socially.

Ultimately, addressing the psychological development of children with EBD is vital for creating inclusive educational environments where every child has the opportunity to succeed. Educators and parents must collaborate to implement targeted interventions that empower these children, helping them overcome challenges and develop the skills necessary for a fulfilling future.

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