

CHILDREN WITH BIPOLAR DISORDER

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Addressing Special Needs at School

A child who is diagnosed with bipolar disorder has a legitimate, significant health impairment (comparable to diabetes, epilepsy or leukemia) that requires ongoing medical management. The child needs and is entitled to accommodations in school. Bipolar disorder and the medications used to treat it can affect a child's school attendance, alertness, and concentration, sensitivity to light noise and stress, motivation, and energy available for learning.

To address your child's unique needs, first request a meeting with your child's teacher, principal, and school counsellor to determine what accommodations can be provided to help make your child's school experience more manageable. You may wish to bring your child's therapist or doctor, or a trained advocate who is knowledgeable about special education.

An evaluation, including psychoeducational testing will be done by the school. A plan (called an Individual Education Plan or IBP) will be written to accommodate your child's needs. Working together as a team, you and the professionals will determine your child's educational needs, set goals and objectives, and decide the most appropriate accommodations to be made. If you do not agree with the team's recommendations, or if you simply want time to consider what can be a lengthy and confusing document, ask to take a copy with you and "think it over" for a few days before signing it.

Because students with bipolar disorder may be exhausted and drained by the end of the school day from the accumulated stress of school, having difficulty completing homework is a common problem. Expectations concerning homework can be modified seasonally, monthly, or daily according to the child's condition. Other examples of accommodations helpful to children and adolescents with bipolar disorder include:

- Smaller class size
- One-on-one or shared special education aide
- Late start to school day if fatigued in the morning
- Recorded books as an alternative to reading when concentration is low
- Designation of a "safe place" at school where the child can go when overwhelmed
- Designated staff member to whom the child can go to as needed
- Unlimited access to drinking water and bathroom
- Curriculum that engages creativity and reduces boredom (for highly creative children)
- Placement in a day hospital treatment program, therapeutic day school or residential treatment center when needed

As a parent, you can do a great deal to help ensure that your child has a positive, productive school experience. Consistent advocacy at school, loving support at home, an effective treatment plan and a solid





support network for the entire family are important ways to see that the illness is

managed, and your child has every opportunity to reach his or her full potential.

"There is hope and there is help."



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Help Themselves*

Page 2

