About the Disorder
Schizophrenia is a medical illness that causes a person to think and act strangely. It is uncommon in young children — usually striking young people between the ages of 16 and 25. This disorder affects about one percent of the population. Schizophrenia can be difficult to recognize in its early phases.

Schizophrenia usually comes on gradually, and teachers are often the first to notice the early signs. For example, students who once enjoyed friendships with classmates may seem to withdraw into a world of their own. They may say things that don’t make sense and talk about strange fears and ideas. Students who show signs of schizophrenia need a prompt mental health assessment.

Early diagnosis and treatment of schizophrenia is important. About 50 percent of people with schizophrenia will attempt suicide; ten to fifteen percent will succeed. Young people with this disease are usually treated with a combination of medication and individual and family therapy. They may also participate in specialized programs.

Symptoms or Behaviors
• Confused thinking (e.g. confusing what happens on television with reality)
• Vivid and bizarre thoughts and ideas
• Hallucinations and delusions, that is, seeing things and hearing voices that are not real
• Severe anxiety and fearfulness
• Extreme moodiness
• Severe problems in making and keeping friends
• Feelings that people are hostile and “out to get them”
• Odd behavior, including behavior resembling that of a younger child
• Disorganized speech
• Lack of motivation
Children’s Mental Health Fact Sheet for the Classroom

Schizophrenia

Educational Implications

Students with schizophrenia can have educational problems such as difficulty concentrating or paying attention. Their behavior and performance may fluctuate from day to day. These students are likely to exhibit thought problems, physical complaints, may act out, or become withdrawn. Sometimes they may show little or no emotional reaction; at other times, their emotional responses may be inappropriate for the situation.

Instructional Strategies and Classroom Accommodations

• Reduce stress by going slowly when introducing new situations.
• Help students set realistic goals for academic achievement and extra-curricular activities.
• Establish regular meetings with the family for feedback on health and progress.
• Because the disorder is so complex and often debilitating, it will be necessary to meet with the family, mental health, and medical professionals who are treating the student. These individuals can provide the information you will need to understand the student’s behaviors, the effects of the psychotropic medication, and how to develop a learning environment.
• Encourage other students to be kind and to extend their friendship.

—from “Schizophrenia: Youth’s Greatest Disabler” produced by the British Columbia Schizophrenia Society

Web site:

Publications:


For additional suggestions on classroom strategies and modifications see “A Teacher’s Guide to Children’s Mental Health” available from MACMH.