

Tourette Syndrome at School

Understanding, support and avoiding punishment for tics

A pupil with Tourette syndrome may be trying to learn while also managing involuntary movements, sounds, premonitory urges, sensory demands, social attention and the effort of suppressing tics. Good school support begins with a simple principle: a tic is not naughty behaviour. A child should not be punished, shamed or repeatedly corrected for something they are not choosing to do. Understanding the function and impact of tics can prevent avoidable distress and help the pupil use their energy for learning rather than hiding.

When a tic looks like behaviour

Some tics are easy to recognise, such as blinking, head movements or repeated sounds. Others can be more complex and may resemble purposeful actions or words. A pupil might touch an object, make a gesture, repeat a phrase, make a socially inappropriate sound or appear to interrupt. Staff should avoid assuming intent simply because an action looks deliberate. Where behaviour is unusual or repetitive, curiosity and knowledge of the pupil's tic profile are more useful than immediate discipline.

Tics are involuntary. Consequences designed to stop an involuntary tic can increase stress without teaching the child anything useful.

Suppressing tics in the classroom

Some pupils suppress tics because they fear attention, teasing or punishment. They may appear to have few tics at school and then tic much more at home. Suppression can require considerable concentration and may leave the pupil tired or unable to focus fully on lessons. A quieter classroom presentation does not prove that Tourette syndrome is having little impact.

Concentration and learning

A child may be listening to the teacher while simultaneously resisting an urge, recovering from a tic or worrying about whether classmates have noticed. Repeated tics can also interrupt reading, handwriting, practical work or speech. Support might include extra processing time, alternatives to handwriting, movement breaks, a quieter workspace or flexible timing. The most useful adjustment depends on the individual pupil.

Movement and short breaks

A planned way to leave the classroom briefly can give a pupil privacy, movement and recovery without turning the break into a punishment. Some children benefit from a discreet exit card or agreed signal. The aim is not to send the child away whenever they tic. It is to give them choice when the environment or internal build-up becomes difficult.

Sensory load and the school environment

Noise, crowded corridors, bright lighting, assemblies, lunch halls, changing classrooms and unpredictable transitions can add to the demands of a school day. Tourette syndrome can also occur alongside ADHD, OCD and other neurodevelopmental or mental-health difficulties. Looking at the whole child can reveal why a particular environment is difficult and which adjustments genuinely help.

Tests, exams and timed work

Tics, urges and suppression can affect concentration and the time needed to complete work. Schools should consider appropriate access arrangements and reasonable adjustments according to the pupil's needs and the relevant rules. A quiet room, rest breaks, extra time or alternative ways of recording answers may be appropriate for some pupils, but arrangements should be individual rather than automatically applied to everyone with Tourette syndrome.

Bullying, imitation and unwanted attention

Peers may stare, imitate a tic, laugh, ask intrusive questions or deliberately try to trigger a response. Schools should treat bullying and harassment seriously while also protecting the pupil from becoming the centre of a public lesson

about Tourette syndrome without their agreement. Ask the child and family how they would like information shared. Education can improve understanding, but dignity and consent matter.

Communication between home and school

Regular communication can help identify changes in tics, fatigue, medication, stress or school demands, but communication should not become constant surveillance. A brief agreed system is often more useful than reporting every tic. Include the pupil in conversations at a level appropriate to their age and understanding. They often know which situations are hardest and which responses make things better or worse.

Reasonable adjustments

In England, Scotland and Wales, the Equality Act 2010 places duties on schools in relation to disabled pupils, including reasonable adjustments where the legal definition is met. Adjustments should address disadvantage and be based on the pupil's individual needs. Families may also discuss SEN support or other education planning with the school where additional needs affect learning or participation.

Helpful responses for staff

Instead of...	Try...
"Stop making that noise."	"You do not need to apologise for a tic."
"You can control it if you try."	"Would a break or adjustment help right now?"
"You weren't doing this yesterday."	"I understand tics can change from day to day."
"Leave the room until you stop."	"You can use your agreed break if you want to."

A simple school support plan

A useful plan can record the pupil's known tics without treating the list as fixed, how they prefer staff to respond, whether they use an exit card or quiet space, relevant sensory needs, how to handle difficult or socially inappropriate tics, what to do if a tic causes pain or injury, agreed exam or classroom adjustments, and who the pupil can approach when they need help. Review the plan because tics and needs can change.

A message for the pupil

You should not have to spend the school day frightened that an involuntary movement or sound will get you into trouble. Your tics do not measure your intelligence, effort or potential. The adults around you have a responsibility to learn, listen and make reasonable changes where they are needed. School should be somewhere you can learn and belong, not somewhere you have to use all your energy pretending your Tourette syndrome is not there.

UK information and support

Tourette's Action provides UK resources for schools, teachers, pupils and families. NHS information covers Tourette syndrome, tics and treatment. Families can also speak with the school's SENCO or equivalent support lead about the pupil's individual educational needs and adjustments.

Sources

NHS: Tourette syndrome; Tics (accessed September 2026). Tourette's Action: education and school resources for Tourette syndrome (accessed September 2026). Equality Act 2010 guidance should be considered alongside current education and examination rules. This guide is for information and support and is not legal or medical advice.