The Neurodivergent Classroom

Tics and Tourette syndrome at a Glance



Tics are sudden, repeated movements or sounds. They come and go and can be held back for a short time, but they aren't something the student chooses to do.

What you may notice in class

- Repeated movements, like blinking or shrugging.
- Sounds like throat clearing, coughing or sniffing.
- Tics vary a lot over hours, days or weeks.
- Holding tics in for long is exhausting and eats up attention.
- Tics can make writing, reading or speaking harder.
- Negative reactions make them pull back or tense up.
- Complex tics can look deliberate.
- In younger kids, tics stand out most during quiet work and in new groups. (elementary school)
- For older students, presentations, tests and long stretches of holding back are hardest. (middle and high school)

Strengths

- Can do strong work even when tics come and go.
- Their own signals help you find agreements that work.
- Can explain what kind of relief they need.
- Other ways of working let their skills show.
- Their experience can help shape fair class rules.

What helps

- Don't comment on tics, and stop any mimicking.
- Agree on a discreet time-out with no questions asked.
- Ease time pressure and build in helpful routines.
- Offer written instructions and other ways to answer.
- Adjust writing tasks when tics get in the way.
- Tell the class only with the student's consent.
- Step in only when safety or the learning goal is affected.
- Give room to move and support without singling them out.
- Review agreements for tests, transitions and new groups.
- With younger kids, head off mimicking and explain the rules clearly. (elementary school)
- With older students, agree on discreet breaks and alternative test conditions. (middle and high school)

What tends not to help

- Asking them to hold their tics in.
- Mistaking tics for provocation or defiance.
- Punishing, laughing at or mimicking tics.
- Presenting coprolalia (involuntary swearing) as part of every case of Tourette.

Words that carry

"I won't comment on the tic. You can keep working."

"You can take our agreed time-out. No need to explain."

"We'll make sure you can learn safely."

"You don't need to explain. Just keep working." (elementary school)

"Let's plan a discreet break for tests and presentations." (middle and high school)

Where to find support

Tourette Association of America
tourette.org
US association with classroom strategies and resources for educators.

Local organizations
Many countries have their own Tourette association. The student's doctor or your school psychologist can point you to one.

Tourettes Action tourettes-action.org.uk
UK charity with key facts for teachers.

NHS: Tourette's syndrome
nhs.uk/conditions/tourettes-syndrome
Clear health information from the UK National Health Service.

More in the Teacher Portal: neurodivergentclassroom.com/teacher-portal/tics-and-tourette/

Sources: European clinical guidelines for Tourette syndrome, version 2.0 · CDC: Information about Tourette Syndrome for Educators · Tourette Association of America: Classroom Strategies