

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

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UNDERSTANDING TICS IN THE SCHOOL SETTING

What are tics?

Tics are sudden, rapid, repetitive movements (motor tics) or sounds (vocal or phonic tics). Tics are involuntary, in that the child cannot control them. However, they can be at least partially suppressed for varying periods of time, often during the school day. Tics are classified as either *simple or complex*. *Simple motor tics* involve one muscle group, such as eye blinking, neck rolling, or shoulder shrugging. *Complex motor tics* are characterized by slower, more purposeful, coordinated movements involving more than one muscle group, such as jumping, squatting, or turning around repeatedly. *Simple vocal tics* are characterized by one sound, such as throat clearing, coughing, or sniffing. *Complex vocal tics* are characterized by combinations of sounds, such as repetitive words, syllables or phrases, such as “shut up,” or “Joey’s a chicken.”

How common are tics?

Tics are very common in school age children. Studies report that up to 25% of school age children will experience tics, at least for a short period (greater than one month, but less than one year). These are known as transient tics. Chronic tics (lasting more than one year) are less common, but not rare. Recent studies suggest that chronic tic disorders are more frequent than previously reported. Tourette’s Disorder is a chronic tic disorder characterized by both motor and vocal tics that have been present for more than one year. Tics and tic disorders are more common in boys than in girls, and tend to run in families.

What is it like to have tics?

Most children with tics or Tourette’s Disorder have mild tic symptoms that tend to wax and wane and fluctuate in frequency and intensity over time. Many children with mild tic symptoms may not even be aware of their movements or sounds, and are not caused distress by them. However, some children do experience distress as a result of their tics. The distress can include physical complaints such as head or neck aches, or emotional distress such as embarrassment about having the tics. Although tics are involuntary, most children learn to suppress them during school and in other public situations. Sometimes this results in an apparent increase in tics in the afternoon at home. Tic suppression may also lead to excessive tiredness or fatigue.

What Can I Do As A Parent?

The Practical First Steps

- If your child does not seem to be aware of the tics, and they are apparent to others, it may be helpful to initiate a supportive discussion about the tics to raise your child’s awareness.
- If your child is aware of the tics, it can be helpful to inquire directly if the tics are causing any concerns, for example, head or neck aches, other bodily symptoms, or any worries or embarrassment about them.
- Even if the tics are not causing your child any distress or impairment in functioning, it can be reassuring to him or her to know of your awareness and interest in how he or she is experiencing the symptoms.
- Children often appreciate their parents “checking in” from time to time about how they are feeling about the tics.
- Make sure that your child is generally living a healthy and active life, including eating well, getting enough sleep, and participating in enjoyable activities. Most tics do not interfere with activities of daily living and are less problematic during focused, pleasurable activities.

- ❑ Since anxiety and stressful or new situations can temporarily increase tics, it is helpful to encourage relaxation and fun.

Tic Management Strategies

- ❑ If the child is embarrassed by the tics, or if the tics are causing disruption in the classroom or at home, it is helpful to use a “tic room”, a private space where the child can go for brief periods for the tics. Usually, quiet places and reduction in stimulation/excitement/anxiety will facilitate reduction of the symptoms.
- ❑ Allowing the child to exit the classroom for brief periods can be helpful in reducing tics.
- ❑ Development of simple relaxation techniques, such as breathing exercises can be helpful.
- ❑ If tics are socially embarrassing, such as spitting or shirt chewing, your child can be encouraged to develop tic substitution strategies. For example, your child can be taught to spit into a tissue instead of on himself or his books/play things, or chew sugarless gum instead of his shirt.

What should I avoid doing?

- ❑ Avoid calling attention to the tics if neither your child, nor his/her teacher or peers are aware of the tics. Many tics are not even noticed in groups of young children in which active movement is the norm.
- ❑ Avoid telling your child to stop or control the tics. Remember, they are involuntary!! Asking the child to stop a tic is like asking someone to stop a sneeze!
- ❑ Avoid allowing the child to become overly excited or stimulated. Many children will experience increased tics during very exciting or aggressive video and computer games.

When should I seek professional help?

You should consider professional evaluation for the following conditions: if the tics appear to persist for more than one year, or at ANY time the tics appear to be causing distress to your child or the family, or at ANY time the tics appear to be interfering with school function, social or family life.

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ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the understanding, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with neuro-psychiatric problems including tics, Tourette’s Disorder, anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We also offer a limited number of no cost services for particular disorders and age groups through clinical studies. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-2479.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center’s website, AboutOurKids.org.



**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health
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