

FAMOUS PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS



**ADAM LEVINE**

The singer has talked about his struggle with ADHD and the challenges it caused for him in school.



# The Best School Support for Kids with Mental Illness

A local expert shares advice on the IEP process, common misunderstandings and tips for making sure your child is properly supported. *By Jessica Schrader*

**G**etting through the school day doesn't always come easily for kids with mental illness. It can be a daily struggle, experts say, and one that has little to do with a child's academic abilities. Instead, symptoms like impulsivity, inattention, irritability or anxiety can stand in the way of a student's success. Finding the right school support is critical – but also notoriously difficult.

"These children are so underserved and misunderstood," says education advocate Marcie Lipsitt, the founder and co-chair of the Michigan Alliance for Special Education and the mother of a child with early-onset bipolar disorder. "There's such a blame game with children that have psychiatric illness."

According to the Association for Children's Mental Health, based in Michigan, 1 in 10 youth have a mental health disorder that's severe enough to impact functioning at home, school or in the community. Kids with emotional or behavioral disorders also have the lowest graduation rates among all students with disabilities.

"Their learning needs are not understood," Lipsitt says. "Many of these children also have comorbid learning disabilities. The whole focus ends up being on the kids' mood regulation or anxiety," instead of how to help them learn.

In the classroom setting, kids with mental illness sometimes have difficulty completing work, staying organized or managing social situations. When behaviors become a problem, parents are frequently called to take their children home – the "pickup plan," as Lipsitt calls it – causing them to miss important instruction time.

"It's not even legal," she says, but many parents don't know this. Plus, "The majority of the kids like going home, so you're reinforcing the behavior."

Other times, schools respond by placing students into self-contained classrooms for children with emotional impairment – not always the best fit, she says.

"They fall further behind academically and they're at greater risk for low self-esteem," Lipsitt explains.

So what can parents and schools do to ensure kids are properly supported? It starts with requesting a special education evaluation from the school district. The process is regulated by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA – a term parents quickly learn, along with others like FAPE (free appropriate public education, a right of all U.S. children with disabilities) and IEP (individualized education program).

"The first step when they're requesting a special education evaluation is to always request an evaluation for both a 504 plan and an IEP," Lipsitt says. Ask for comprehensive assessments including occupational, speech and language therapy, and more "to rule in or rule out all of the other factors that are adversely impacting this child in school."

As you work through the process with your school district's special education team, remember to keep conversations centered on your child's unique needs. If you're asked "what you want," refocus the conversation to "what the child needs."

"There's no one size fits all," Lipsitt emphasizes.

Once a child's needs are determined,

school districts can provide various supports and interventions to help – from social work support and classroom aides to shortening assignments, providing breaks and more.

Parents should keep in mind that their input is valuable and must be considered.

"While parents are not dictators, the school isn't a dictator either," Lipsitt says. "The problem is that parents don't know what they don't know. That's why they need to seek out outside resources (to understand their rights). I always say to parents, 'Your child did not come with a playbook. It's OK to say you don't understand.'"

For help navigating the system, or if you run into problems, consider the Michigan Alliance for Families, [WrightsLaw.com](http://WrightsLaw.com), support groups from the National Alliance on Mental Illness or working with an advocate.

Don't be afraid to "push" when you need to.

"I have parents that are worried that if they push too hard, that there will be retaliation. There's no greater retaliation than watching your child lose his or her education," she says. "If you think it's hard now, wait until your child is a young adult and can't get a job, can't go to post-secondary. Pushing now is (necessary). Your child deserves no less."

And, difficult as it may be, try not to get discouraged along the way.

"I fight for kids because kids don't ask to be born, and a child born with psychiatric illness did not do that," she says. "Be that child for one day. See what it is like to be that child. I fight for kids unapologetically hard because they deserve no less."

## THE GOOD FIGHT

Raising a child with a mental illness means taking on a new role beyond "mom" or "dad."

You become an overnight advocate, endlessly pursuing the best opportunities, therapies and supports for your child. When it comes to his or her education, what more could be worth fighting for?

It breaks our hearts to know that so many families face difficulties when trying to access special education services for their children at school. No child deserves to be sent home, excluded from the classroom or left behind because of symptoms they can't control. We also know just how successful *all* children can be when they're given the individualized support they need.

We explore this important issue in this month's edition of *Opening Minds, Ending Stigma*, and we hope it inspires you to keep fighting.



**Leonard Smith**  
Board Member, Flinn Foundation

Brought to you by



Find more information at [FlinnFoundation.org](http://FlinnFoundation.org).