

Tip Sheet for Handling Situations Where Student with PWS Fixates on a Non-PWS Classmate of the Opposite Sex

- Students with PWS can fixate or obsess over people just as they can with things.
- When a student with PWS wants a “girlfriend” or “boyfriend” they are trying to fit in socially.
- Try to use social stories or some other activity to teach appropriate social interaction. People with PWS don’t pick up on subtle social cues and they do not learn by watching appropriate behavior modeled by others. They need to be consistently reminded of what is appropriate behavior at home, school and any other setting where social interaction occurs. Appropriate behavior includes both verbal and physical interactions.
- Use a direct approach. When not in an argument or outburst, share in clear and direct language what is appropriate behavior and offer coping strategies. For example, “She wants to be your friend not your girlfriend” will likely not be effective because it is not clear enough. It might be more effective to say, “When you see her you can say ‘hi’ but then you need to keep going.” Or, you might suggest that the person of interest is really like their brother or sister rather than boyfriend or girlfriend, and that is how they should be treated.
- Set up a system of regular positive reinforcements to encourage appropriate social behavior.
- People with PWS do not understand social rejection and do not know how to cope with it. If their effort to relate to the person they are fixated on is rejected they might respond with some type of verbal outburst which can include profanity and threats. While the words said can be disturbing it is unlikely any real harm will follow. However, in these situations it is possible that angry parents can demand a response either from the school or law enforcement. One strategy might be to reach out to the parents of the other student involved to educate them on PWS and what is happening as well as the steps being taken to positively manage the situation. Often, if people understand the behavior is a manifestation of a disability, it helps. **If law enforcement becomes involved share with them as soon as possible PWSA’s statement for Law Enforcement and contact a crisis counselor at 800-926-4797.**
- Because the person with PWS is limited in ability to react to social rejection, supervision and environmental management are essential. This includes:
 - Creating class and activity schedules that limit opportunities for interaction.
 - Preventing any “unsupervised” interactions (i.e. school social events).
 - Having people who understand the person with PWS and the situation available to manage any outbursts that arise.
- If a pattern of fixation has begun it may happen again in the future. But knowing the steps to take in response will help to prevent a crisis situation from developing.

Additional Information

by Lisa Graziano, M.A., Executive Director of the Prader-Willi California Foundation

"Crushes" are common in persons with PWS and can be challenging to manage. Persons with PWS can be "fickle," however, and unknowingly or without apparent concern break the heart of their boy- or girlfriend as they quickly move on to the next crush.

Obsessive-compulsive symptoms are common in persons with PWS, and some students with PWS can develop intense fixations upon classmates, other students, teachers, aides, etc., of the same or opposite sex, with or without romantic intent.

Making something "taboo" generally *increases* its emotional pull especially in persons with PWS who are typically oppositional and drawn to do things they have been asked *not* to do. It is generally recommended, therefore, *not* to directly forbid interaction with the object of fixation, but instead create clear and simple boundaries around what specific behavior is acceptable and what specific behavior is not acceptable. It is helpful to work *with* the student with PWS to collaboratively create a list of 'rules' to help the student with PWS understand when, where, and how they may interact with the object of fixation. These rules should be written down so that they may be referred to whenever necessary. For example:

Rules

1. Sally [student with PWS] and Jane [object of fixation] may talk and interact together during recess.
2. Sally may play on the swings or play tetherball during other breaks.
3. Sally may not hold hands or kiss or touch the body of Jane.
4. Sally may help teacher with important classroom projects at the request of the teacher.
5. Sally may write a letter to Jane during a break and take it home to her mother/father to read. The letter will not be shared with Jane without the permission of Sally's parents and teacher.

Sometimes it can be helpful to "prescribe the symptom" in order to alter an obsessive or compulsive symptom. Frequently, *having* to perform or think of the obsession saps power from the obsession, and individuals may eventually become 'bored' with *having* to perform it. Therefore, one intervention might be to direct the student with PWS to think about qualities liked about the object of fixation for a full five minutes every day at a specific time every of the day, for one week. For example, provide space for the student to think about the object of fixation every Monday from 10:00 a.m. to 10:05 a.m. Direct the student to *not* think of *anything* else other than the qualities admired. The student *must* use the entire five minutes thinking about these qualities and may *not* skip any day of the week.

Please note that PWS is a neurocognitive disorder and the fixation symptom likely results from the neurological and physiological manifestations of PWS. The obsessive, compulsive, and fixation symptoms, along with many others, can be quite challenging to change or manage.

For more information about PWS or to schedule a PWS School Training, contact Prader-Willi California Foundation at info@pwcf.org, 800-400-9994, or www.PWCF.org