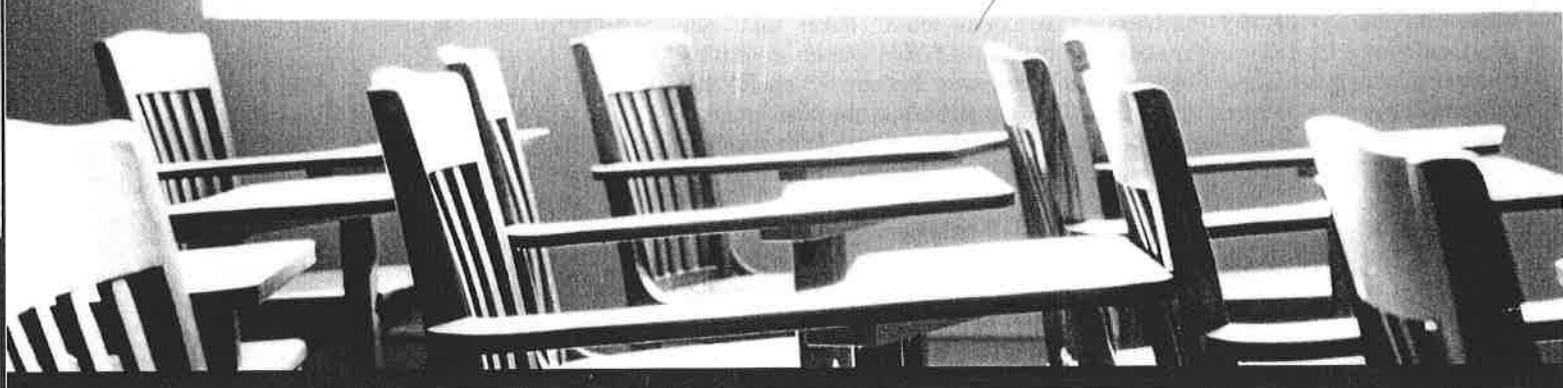


BY BRETT NOVICK

DEALING WITH BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS IN THE CLASSROOM: 13 STRATEGIES



As classroom teachers adjust to changes in standards, testing and evaluation, the real work of teaching remains. This includes behavior issues in the classroom. Regardless of the reforms that come down the pike, as long as there is teaching and as long as there are students, there will be behavioral difficulties in every class, in every district and in every state. And educators will do their best to deal with these problems so that learning can take place.

I have gathered these classroom management skills by trial and error and sometimes the hard way. After almost 20 years of working with students, I have found certain interventions that were successful, while others simply frustrated all involved. As a consultant within classrooms specific to behaviors in both alternative and public schools, I have been mentored by great teachers who knew what to do and — just as important — what not to do. Additionally, my work with educators as an adjunct instructor at Rutgers University has reinforced what works in classroom management and what creates larger discord. As a therapist working in homes and in private practice, I understand the frustration of parents when addressing behavioral issues that spill out into the classroom.

The following are some ways of addressing these behavioral issues within the classroom setting. These suggestions focus on practicality over theory.

1. STOP TALKING

You only have a certain amount of verbal ammunition. The more you speak, the less effective that ammunition becomes. Keep comments brief and to the point — anything more and you risk sounding like the teacher from Charlie Brown! If you have a consequence, warn once then do it.

2. DON'T BE A BAD MIRROR

When a student is having a tantrum, remember he/she will reflect your reaction. If your emotions are escalated, the tantrum escalates. Stay calm and repeat the same mantra over and over again (i.e., “sit down and take out your pencil”) to avoid getting into a power struggle or being drawn into an emotional vortex.

3. “DO-DO” DON’T “DON’T...DON’T”

When we provide classroom direction, we can do it in two ways — negatively (“don’t do that”) or positively (“I want you to do this...”). By telling students what *not* to do you are not providing information on what you want them to do. You may think, “but they should know what to do.” Still, when a child is angry or distressed, being direct and staying positive is your best bet.

4. IF YOU HAD PIZZA EVERY NIGHT YOU WOULD EVENTUALLY WANT SOMETHING ELSE

We often question why behavioral contracts and awards don’t work. Well, if we have a student with attention issues who can’t focus on one thing for more than a few minutes, the same is true with rewards. If you give a student the same reward each time, he/she will become bored. Therefore it is better to have an inventory of re-

wards. Ask questions such as, "What books would you like to read? What activities would you like to do? If you had one-on-one time with me what would you like to do?" In this way, you have several banked opportunities that you can provide or take away as needed in a rapid fashion.

5. REMEMBER THAT **ANGER HAS TWO SIDES**

Anger and frustration have two components: the physiological and the emotional. This is important to remember because a seemingly calm student may still have the physiological feelings of anger (rapid heartbeat, clinched fists, "fight or flight" reactions). Therefore, if you agitate the student during this phase, he or she may rapidly become angered again. It is like taking a pot of water off the flame, putting it back on two minutes later and expecting it not to boil quickly. Give a student 15-20 minutes of time to cool both emotional and physical anger.

6. IF A STUDENT IS REMOVED FROM THE CLASSROOM **DO NOT GIVE HIM/HER ATTENTION** WHEN HE/SHE RETURNS

When students return from an angry episode, they are embarrassed and now will have all eyes on them upon return to the class. Breaking your routine and addressing them adds to that and risks another behavioral issue. Continue with your lesson. If the student has a question, allow him/her to ask it.

7. **GO DEEPER THAN ANGER**

When a student is angry it is rarely the only emotion being felt. For instance, when a student has been teased by classmates, he/she may be angry and sad. If a student has difficulty with the work, he/she may be frustrated and angry. When we address the student we are best to address the secondary underlying feeling because we are able to allow the student (especially boys) to learn that there is a spectrum of feelings, not just anger. Also, sometimes the secondary feeling may be easier to address.

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8. MAKE SURE THE **CONSEQUENCE FITS THE ACTION**

When giving consequences, make certain that the consequence logically fits what the student has done. Look for a "real world" example that you can apply within the classroom. For instance, if a student interrupts the classroom for 15 minutes, then he/she should owe you 15 minutes of time during recess doing his/her work. Sometimes we provide consequences based on our "pet peeves" or tend to be harsher if we are having a bad day. Consequences are best understood if they are consistent, logical and make sense to all involved. Using an egg timer in the classroom is sometimes a good concrete reminder for students to realize the importance of time.

IF YOU KNOW THEY DID IT
— SAY IT AND SELECT
A CONSEQUENCE
ACCORDINGLY.

9. DO NOT KEEP PUTTING WATER IN A **LEAKY PIPE**

The reality of education is sometimes you will get less parental involvement than you would like and, in some cases, none at all. Yet, we call the parent each time and hope for assistance with the child only to be told (either verbally or in action) that this is the school's responsibility and the parent does not wish to be involved. When this is the case, it is crucial to realize that the rewards and consequences need to be internal. That is, everything that you do to be effective must be done within the school setting.

10. TEACH THE STUDENT TO **BE ASSERTIVE**

Students can be extremely passive to very aggressive when dealing with conflict. The goal is for students to be somewhere in the middle and be assertive. To do so, students need to be taught to express how they are feeling, why they feel that way and (most important) what they need in order to solve the problem. Students who are angry often need help realizing that others cannot help them without direction on how to do so.

11. **DO NOT TRY TO "CATCH" A STUDENT IN A LIE**

We often set students up to lie. "Did you do that?" is a loaded question. The student figures if they say "yes" they are in trouble; if they say "no," then they have a chance of getting out of it. If you know they did it, say it and select a consequence accordingly.

12. **PICK AND CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES**

Again, if everything is a critical issue then nothing is a critical issue. Decide the two or three issues that you want to work on with this student and stick to them.

13. **CHECK WITH THE PARENT TO FIND OUT IF THE FAMILY NEEDS SUPPORT**

In our districts there are families that do not have electricity, water or food. If a family is struggling to survive, they are less likely to be able to provide the elements necessary for the student to thrive.

Keep your sanity in the sea of upheaval in education! I have found that these strategies help when confronted with student behavior issues. I bet you can add more to this list. Effective classroom management is the best way to ensure that you'll be able to do the work you love and that students have the opportunity to learn as much as possible. ☺

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