

# 10 tips to make managing those tricky students a little bit easier

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## 1. Get their attention first.

Always, always, always make sure your students have your attention first before giving any instructions. The simplest way to do this is to say their name and then wait. Silence is magic! Then, when you are sure they are listening, and only then, give the instruction. This is particularly important for children who may have attention difficulties. Following such a simple tip can avoid a lot of teacher frustration.

## 2. Know what to say when you don't know what you are going to say.

Don't you just hate it when you get a student who, for whatever reason, is making it their mission that day to continually defy you. You give them an instruction, they say no. You follow up with the same instruction and they roll their eyes and still say no. Arghh! What I suggest for these students, who are trying to engage you in a power struggle and are determined not to follow your instruction, is to have a script to follow, a statement for you to recite to help you manage their defiance. I call this statement my "bottom line statement," **the statement I say when I don't know what I'm going to say**. The statement I use when all else seems to have failed and it is pointless to just stand there and keep on repeating the same instruction.

My bottom line statement, which is best delivered in a calm almost indifferent manner, is this; "I have given you an instruction which you will need to follow, there will be consequences if you don't. I know you can make a good choice." Then I walk away. Having such a script lowers my anxiety as it gives me a plan to follow, and increases my confidence as I know I will be able to handle most situations. Such a statement also gives a breathing space for both teacher and student. Be sure to follow up with the student later!

## 3. Be vulnerable.

Know that it is all right not to have all the answers. Asking for help is not only OK, it is the right thing to do to ensure our students get a consistent and predictable response from the adults who care for them. Being vulnerable

means at times that we might also have to raise for discussion, differences of opinion that we might have with our colleagues regarding the management of students. These discussions might cause us to feel uncomfortable. After all, who wants to talk about issues that might create tensions? I sure don't! But we need to do this so that any disagreements we, the adults, might have about managing students is resolved so the students receive consistent, predictable management from the adults who care for them.

Managing students with behaviour disorders is an adult issue, an adult issue!

## 4. Focus on the positive.

The most powerful consequence for changing behaviour is positive feedback. Put the majority of our focus and attention on the behaviour we want to see.

## 5. When in doubt ask the question; "What is in the best interests of the child?"

When unsure of how to respond to a situation, having this little script in the back of your mind will help inform your choices. It reminds us that we are there for the students, that our emotions are our responsibility and that any decisions we make regarding our students needs to be in their best interests, not ours. It might mean that sometimes, as a decision maker, you might have to disagree with the majority opinion of your colleagues regarding, say, a consequence for a child who has done something that has caused staff to be upset. This is precisely the time when a measured, calm, non-emotional and predictable response is called for, because it is "in the best interests of the child." I'd recommend having this little maxim (' When in doubt, ask the question, "What is in the best interests of the child?" ') printed on cards, laminated and stuck to the walls of offices. Nifty little reminders!

## 6. Try to understand what's driving the behaviour.

It happens to be your turn to be the poor sod on playground duty. On your wanderings around the school you see a student who

appears to be arguing and seems agitated. You make an assumption, a fair assumption under the circumstances and one that most people would make, that the student is aggressive. This behaviour might seem a bit scary to you so you approach the student with a not insignificant amount of trepidation. Thinking that the child is just being defiant and wanting to get their own way you issue a firm command for them to settle down and you give them 5 seconds to do that. Trouble is, after you do this, their behaviour escalates and they become more agitated! What's going on here? It could be that their behaviour, although appearing aggressive, is in fact a physical manifestation of anxiety. The child is not aggressive but anxious and anxiety under certain circumstances can appear as if it is aggressive behaviour. How does this happen? Well, if I asked you to imagine something you were very fearful of doing and I said to you that this thing you are fearful of, you have to face, right now, and if you don't you will be forced to, you might respond in an aggressive way to avoid this fearful thing. Outwardly then, your avoidance behaviour, might appear aggressive, when in fact it is actually coming from anxiety!

So often anxious behaviour is misinterpreted as defiance. The way we manage a student with anxiety is similar yet different to the way we manage a student who is deliberately opposing us. To manage a child who is anxious, yet who appears aggressive, we first need to validate their emotions (the non-validation of emotions is associated with higher emotional arousal) and be directive in what we want them to do. We do this while speaking calmly and slowly. We lend them our calm. Such a dialogue might sound like this; "You seem really upset / worried / anxious, how about you go outside and practice some slow breathing for 10 minutes or so and then when you are calm come back in and let me know what's happening for you." If you don't know the students and are unsure of whether they are anxious or just being deliberately defiant assume, until you get evidence to the contrary, that they are anxious and manage their outbursts as if that is the case.

The more we understand about what's behind the behaviour, the more effective our management will be.

#### **7. Come from the head and not the gut.**

Manage ourselves first. Acknowledge how we feel about our students but don't base our behaviour management on these emotions. If

we are feeling angry, don't lash out at our students; if we are feeling overwhelmed, don't try to make our students feel guilty. Instead we need to come from a rational space. Know that it is OK to feel however we feel when confronted with behaviours that challenge us. It is OK to feel angry, to feel inadequate, to feel fearful or overwhelmed or whatever emotion you experience. If we are honest with ourselves, we have all felt these emotions at one time or another in our teaching career and what they indicate, is that, we are just like everyone else. To manage these, what at times can be powerful feelings, we need to first validate them. Say to yourself, "I am feeling angry," or whatever the emotion might be. Validating our feelings tends to have a calming influence upon us. Once we are calmer we are in a better space to interact with our students. Our emotions are our responsibility.

#### **8. Be a great role model.**

Some students may come from home environments that may not provide great role models, be one! Show them a different way of being in the world. Show them that adults can be trusted, that adults will manage their own emotions, that adults will be fair and reasonable and that the world is full of care and compassion. Teaching students with behavioural disorders, I have stated many times, is like attending a **free personal growth course**, as you learn to manage your emotions so you can provide a safe and caring environment for those students, especially those students, who defy and provoke you.

#### **9. Make an environment where it is safe for a child to own up to misbehaving.**

People can only change a behaviour when they own the behaviour, when they can say, "Yes I did it, I am responsible for that." If we don't own our behaviour and constantly blame others for what we do, then we will continue to do the behaviour we disown. And people will only own a behaviour when it is safe for them to do so. Create a school environment where it is safe for a child (and adult!) to say, "I did it."

#### **10. Less can be more.**

Often our children drown in a sea of words. Fewer words make an instruction easier to follow.