

Chapter 8

RESPONDING TO PERSISTENT MISBEHAVIOR

CLASSROOM SCENARIO

Wilma is a constant problem in the 10th-grade English class. She has an insolent attitude, makes an obvious display that the class is a waste of time, makes fun of other students, and constantly challenges teacher authority. Frankly, the class runs much smoother when Wilma is absent. Today, a full 5 minutes after the class has begun, Wilma comes sauntering into the classroom, slamming the door behind her. The attention of the whole class is on Wilma. For Ms. Baker, this is the last straw.

“Wilma, why are you tardy?” snapped Ms. Baker.

“I had to go to the bathroom. Is that okay with you?” was the sarcastic reply.

“Wilma, I don’t appreciate your attitude!”

“Well, I don’t appreciate your attitude, either, so I guess we’re even.”

“Wilma, I’ve had enough of you!!! Take this note and go to the office, right now!”



CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain why teacher persistence is required when students do not respond to teacher attempts to stop inappropriate behavior

- Identify a range of alternative responses consistent with your values and beliefs
 - List steps that can be used in keeping responsibility for behavior on the student
 - Model how to respond to misbehavior with clarity and firmness
 - Describe the process of limit setting
 - Define preferred activity time and state how it can be used as a response to misbehavior
 - Explain when time-out might be an appropriate response to behavior problems
 - List the steps of behavioral problem solving and the development of behavioral improvement agreements
 - List the steps that can be used in helping students learn to modify their own behavior
 - Model a parent–teacher conference
 - Define the uses and the potential problems associated with detention
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There will always be students who lack self-control or who meet their personal needs through misbehavior. Students like Wilma cause teachers stress and sleepless nights. These students dominate teacher thoughts and interfere with the satisfactions of teaching. These students seem to have a knack for pushing the right buttons to upset the teacher. The feeling is often, “This would be a good class if _____ was not a member.” On the other hand, it can be extremely rewarding to see students who are persistent behavior problems change their behavior and begin learning self-control. One of us once taught a “behavior adjustment” class of middle school students. These were students with persistent problems who were referred to the class from several nearby schools. It was one of the most professionally rewarding experiences in this teacher’s career.

Low-profile responses to the misbehavior of these students do not seem to have much impact. These students require more direct and firm teacher action. However, direct and firm teacher intervention is not without some difficulties. Direct responses take more time and thought. They are more disruptive to the learning process and focus student attention on inappropriate behavior. If not handled with care, they may reinforce the inappropriate behavior rather than teaching the appropriate alternative.

Elias and Schwab (2006) contend that the type of responses applied to problem behaviors is an important component of the management and discipline process. They state that the system of responses used can either “make or break” the entire discipline system. Therefore, the system of responses needs to be considered carefully and needs to be planned out in advance. Since it is difficult to predict the

types of misbehavior that can occur in a given classroom, teachers need to be aware of a variety of responses and when they might be appropriately applied.

Responses to persistent misbehavior require a good deal of teacher persistence. The students have developed their behavioral patterns over a period of time, and immediate changes should not be expected. Students who demonstrate persistent behavior problems have discovered that they can achieve personal goals of attention and power through inappropriate behavior. Because they have developed these responses as a means to achieve personal goals, they may just try harder when teachers attempt to get them to change their behavior. Therefore, initial responses to persistent behavior problems may result in the problem getting worse before it gets better. Teachers need to be persistent and avoid giving up if initial attempts to change behavior do not work as well as anticipated.

Another potential problem associated with responses to persistent behavior problems is that they create conditions that can result in power struggles. Students have been used to getting their way, and they will resist teacher attempts to stop the behavior. When these power struggles get out of hand, they are disruptive to the relationships between the teacher and the students, and they harm attempts to build a supportive community.

We subscribe to the approach of using a range of consequences when responding to persistent behavior. The consequences implemented need to be based on the needs and the goals of the misbehaving student, the ability of the student to exercise self-control, and the severity of the offense. Effective consequences are clear and specific, they preserve the dignity of the student, and they teach the student that there are consequences to misbehavior (Hardin, 2006).

In this chapter, we provide suggestions for a range of alternative responses for persistent misbehavior. These alternatives have been used by teachers to respond effectively to persistent misbehavior. The responses to persistent misbehavior are more intrusive and require more effort and planning than do those for minor problems. They should be used when other, low-profile responses have not had the desired effect or when the problem is serious enough to warrant a more direct and intrusive response.

It is important for each teacher to identify responses consistent with personal values and beliefs. This list should be used as a beginning point for developing a personal range of alternatives. You need to think through these alternatives ahead of time. It is difficult to respond appropriately in the midst of a complex and fast-moving classroom. Developing a personal discipline plan with a range of alternatives can be extremely valuable in providing you with an increased sense of security and confidence and in helping you choose an appropriate response. It would be useful to consider what alternatives might have been applied to the scenario at the beginning of the chapter.

A RANGE OF RESPONSES FOR PERSISTENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

Many new teachers have difficulty responding to persistent misbehavior. They become frustrated because their previous responses seem to have had little impact. They spend considerable time worrying about the problem and frequently feel as if their power and authority is being challenged. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers, because one response does not fit all students and all situations. What works with one teacher in one environment might not be as effective in the classroom of another teacher and with another group of students. Students are different; consequently, the causes of their misbehavior are different. Teachers, too, are different, as are their personalities and strengths. A strict prescription or a “one size fits all” approach will not succeed.

Although the needs of teachers are seldom addressed when specifying approaches to inappropriate behavior, they are an important consideration. Teacher responses need to be consistent with the values and the beliefs of the teacher. If certain responses are uncomfortable for teachers and inconsistent with their values or beliefs, they will be reluctant to use those responses and will run the risk of ignoring inappropriate behavior or appearing to be inconsistent. These conditions will only make the problems worse. In addition, if teachers are uncomfortable with a response, they are likely to do a poor job of implementing the approach and it is likely to be more harmful than helpful. Therefore, you need to be aware of a range of alternative responses that are consistent with your values, your personality, and your strengths. Table 8.1 lists a variety of direct teacher interventions from which you might choose.

Focusing Responsibility for the Problem

Anyone who has spent any time in a classroom is familiar with the scenario. The teacher notes a student engaged in inappropriate behavior and responds with,

Table 8.1 A Selection of Direct Teacher Interventions

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- Focus responsibility
 - Respond with clarity and firmness
 - Set limits
 - Limit preferred activity time
 - Provide a cost-benefit analysis
 - Give a time-out
 - Rearrange the environment
 - Have a teacher–student conference
 - Use behavioral problem solving
 - Write up a behavioral improvement agreement
 - Teach the student to modify own behavior
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“Mary, why are you out of your seat?” Mary responds, “Helen didn’t know what to do and needed help.” Or, a teacher reacts to misbehavior with, “John, stop talking!” John responds, “Billy was bothering me and I was just telling him to stop so I could go to work!” Very clever! In both instances, the student has tried to evade responsibility for his or her behavior by blaming it on someone else. They have attempted to change the focus from their actions to the actions of someone else or to describe their actions as helpful. Unwittingly, in these examples, the teacher response has opened the door for students to evade responsibility for their actions. Frequently, these tactics are successful and the attention of the teacher is diverted from the inappropriate behavior.

As previously discussed, it is important for students to learn to accept responsibility for their behavior and there needs to be a clear relationship between their actions and the consequences. In the scenarios described in the previous paragraph, the reactions of the teacher have made it more difficult to keep the responsibility on the student who is demonstrating the inappropriate behavior. In considering how to respond to persistent misbehavior, we need a response that does not allow students to evade responsibility and keeps the focus on the relationship between their actions and the consequences. When responding to incidents of misbehavior, it is useful to do so in a way that does not allow the student to make excuses. Our chosen response should be one that keeps the focus on the action of the student. However, keep in mind that teachers often have to deal with a problem quickly and do not have time to engage in extended responses. A relatively simple process that can be useful has been adapted from the approach originally proposed by Glasser (1965) a number of years ago.

Ask the Student to Describe Behavior

The first step is critical and involves a change of emphasis on the part of the teacher. The first response needs to be phrased so that it takes away the opportunity for the student to come up with an excuse. This is done simply by asking, “What are you doing?” The emphasis is on what the student is doing and not why they are doing it. The *why* question opens the door for rationalization, excuses, and a debate about the behavior. The purpose is to get students to describe their behavior quickly in a way that forces them to take responsibility. To be sure, students who have learned to play the classroom game will try to respond with an excuse. When this occurs, the teacher simply ignores the response and focuses back on the student. “Mary, I asked what you were doing.” Other students may try to play the ignorance card by responding with, “Nothing.” Others may try to shift the focus by identifying another behavior such as “I’m just sitting here.” If the student persists in trying to avoid identifying their behavior, the teacher can simply state, “I saw you . . .”

Get the Student to Identify the Consequences

Once the inappropriate behavior has been identified, simply ask, “What happens when individuals do that?” The intent is to establish a clear link between the behavior and the consequences. The students need to understand that it is their behavior that is leading to the consequence and not the whims of a vindictive or angry teacher. An understanding of the link makes it possible for students to comprehend that their behavior is a matter of choice and the consequences that they experience are also a matter of choice. This step works best if there is a set of rules and procedures that has been established, and the class has either identified or discussed the possible consequences for violations.

If a student refuses to identify consequences of responses with the typical, “I don’t know,” the teacher identifies the consequences for the student. This requires that the teacher have some consequences ready to implement. Frequently, just asking the student to identify the behavior and the consequences of the behavior is enough to stop the behavior. This exchange need take no more than a minute or two. If the behavior persists, implement the consequences.

Have the Student Make a Value Judgment About the Behavior

If the student does not change, a one-on-one conference needs to be held when there is an opportunity to do so. In this conference, review what the student was doing and the consequences that follow such a behavior, and then ask the student to make a value judgment. This is accomplished quite simply by asking the student if he or she wants to continue to experience the consequences of his or her actions. Another question that can be posed is, “How are these actions helping you?” The purpose of getting students to make value judgments is to get them to identify that there is a linkage between their actions and the consequences. They also need to consider how this behavior is harming them, not helping them meet their needs.

Some students may persist in defending their actions by making statements such as, “Yeah, that’s okay with me.” At this point, the teacher should not engage in a prolonged discussion or try to argue with the students. The teacher can respond by calmly stating, “I wanted to make sure that you understood the choices you were making and the consequences.” Students are often bluffing and trying to engage the teacher in a power struggle; by keeping the responsibility for the behavior on the student, the teacher can avoid unnecessary power struggles.

Develop a Plan With the Student for Changing the Behavior

If students respond that they do not want to continue to experience the consequences of their behavior and that they recognize that their behavior is not

helping them, the door is open for developing a plan to change their behavior. This does not mean it needs to be a time-consuming step that results in a complex plan; the best plans are those that are easy to implement and that cover a relatively short period of time. It is important that the plan be one with which the student has a high probability of success. Once students attain success in following a plan, then they should be reinforced for their success.

The purpose of this step is to help students establish a plan that will help them fulfill needs in a productive way. This step can be implemented simply by asking the student, “What can we do to make sure that this will not happen again?” If a student is reluctant to answer, an appropriate response is to state simply, “You think about it, and I will return in a few minutes and discuss it.”

When the student does identify a plan, the student needs to be asked why he or she thinks this will work and what should be done if it does not. The teacher might make suggestions but should not attempt to force a plan on the student. The student must make a commitment to the plan, and this commitment may be only a superficial one if the student believes he or she has no choice but to follow the teacher’s plan.

If the student is unable to complete the plan successfully, another conference can be held with the student to develop a new plan. It may well be that several plans will need to be developed before the student realizes that the teacher means business and is not going to give up.

Return to the scenario at the beginning of the chapter. How might the teacher have used this approach with Wilma? How might that have changed the dialog and the power struggle between Wilma and the teacher?

Responding With Clarity and Firmness

A verbal response is one of the most frequent teacher responses to persistent misbehavior. However, many verbal responses are ineffective. Those verbal responses often take the form of vague and generic statements such as, “Please behave” and “Let’s get back to work!” In some classrooms, the entire lesson is filled with intrusive and ineffective verbal responses of this sort. Kounin (1970), in his extensive study of classroom management, found that for verbal responses to be effective, they needed to have clarity and firmness.

Clarity involves sending a verbal message that identifies who is misbehaving, what that person is doing, and what he or she should be doing instead. A verbal message involving clarity might be as follows: “Betty, stop your talking and begin working on the assignment.” This message indicates that Betty is the target, her talking is the inappropriate behavior, and working on the assignment is the acceptable alternative. In this message, there is no question about for whom the message is intended and what is required. Verbal messages such as “Class, let’s all behave” fail the clarity test.

Firmness involves nonverbal messages. When the verbal message is delivered with clarity, it is accompanied by tone of voice and body language that indicate that the teacher means business. As the message is delivered, eye contact is established with the student, the facial expression is stern, movement is toward the student, and posture is erect and rigid. If the verbal message is accompanied by smiling and laughing and the tone of voice is light, a mixed message is sent and it is most likely that the student will receive the nonverbal signals, which are likely to be interpreted to mean that the teacher is insincere and the verbal message is not very important. Then if the teacher responds with a consequence, the student feels betrayed.

Limit Setting

Limit setting is another effective response to persistent misbehavior. It is proposed by Jones (2001) as an approach to rule enforcement that is relatively quick, emphasizes body language, and conveys an “I mean business” demeanor. Jones calls limit setting the gentle use of personal power.

This means that teachers are exercising their personal power in an assertive, yet gentle manner. An important prerequisite to limit setting is to remain calm throughout the process. Jones contends that emotions are contagious. If the teacher is upset, the student will be upset. Clarity and firmness are also important conditions for effective use of limit setting.

Jones defines limit setting as moving in, dealing with back talk, and moving out. A prerequisite to limit setting is teacher awareness of behavior throughout the classroom. This is the withitness described by Kounin (1970). Jones emphasizes that disruptions need to be identified as soon as they begin and there needs to be a swift response. Once misbehavior is noted, Jones states that the teacher needs to stop teaching and focus on the misbehavior. If the misbehavior does not immediately stop, the teacher implements the process by moving in.

Moving In. If you are working with the whole class, calmly state to the class, “Excuse me, class.” If you are working independently with another student, tell the student you will be right back. Next, make sure your body language communicates disapproval and a full commitment to dealing with the problem. Take a couple of deep breaths to relax yourself and call the student’s name in an unemotional or bland manner. Then walk directly to the edge of the student’s desk. Do not focus on anything other than the misbehavior. The intent is to inform the student that he or she has your undivided attention and you mean business. When arriving at the student’s desk, body posture should be erect, and eye contact established. Then it is useful to pause for a couple of seconds to take a couple more deep breaths. Once again, this is calming, and it gives the student an opportunity to think and make a

decision. If the student makes a commitment to return to work, nothing needs to be said and the teacher can then proceed to the moving out phase.

If the student does not make an obvious commitment to return to work, then a verbal and a physical prompt is used. The physical prompt involves bending at the waist, placing one hand on their desk and using the other hand to indicate what the student should be doing. This might involve placing a pencil in the student's hand, moving the work to a direct location in front of the student, or removing a distracting object. The verbal prompt is a command or directive using clarity to tell the student to stop what he or she is doing and what he or she should be doing instead. If this does not elicit the desired result, both hands are placed on opposite sides of the desk, the teacher leans over to be at eye level, and eye contact is maintained until the student gets back on task. Then the teacher remains for a few seconds and begins the moving out phase.

Back Talk. Some students will attempt to display their power and take control of the situation through back talk. *Back talk* is defined as verbal statements intended to change the subject, divert attention from their behavior, and get off the hook. Back talk is not always hostile or confrontational. It may even appear to be a compliment. For example, some students are really adept at diverting the teacher with statements such as "You look nice today." Other forms of back talk are denial of any wrongdoing, blaming others, profanity, insults, or even crying. All forms of back talk have the same purpose; they are diversionary tactics designed to elicit a reaction from the teacher that will change the focus. Jones contends that back talk will starve if not fed. Therefore, a good approach is simply to stay quiet and ignore it.

Jones suggests that the first step in dealing with back talk is *camping out*. Camping out means that the teacher settles into proximity and takes up residence at the student's desk. This is done by lowering weight on the hands and elbows so that the face of the teacher and the student are on the same level. The facial expression and body posture of the teacher should communicate indifference or boredom. When the student stops the back talk, the verbal prompt is repeated. The intent is to communicate that you were not listening and are not going to allow attention to be diverted to something else. If back talk resumes, when the student has stopped, the prompt is delivered yet again. This is what is called the *broken record* technique. If three or four attempts at repeating the prompt do not stop the back talk, then a more serious consequence may need to be used.

Moving Out. The intent of moving out is to communicate to the students that they are expected to stay on task and their behavior will be monitored. The first step in moving out begins when the student returns to acceptable behavior. It involves

quietly thanking the student for returning to work, taking a couple more deep breaths to stay calm, and staying in place for a few seconds before slowly standing.

If moving out is done too quickly, a return to off-task behavior usually follows. Not moving away too quickly is intended to send the message that the teacher means business. Stand slowly but do not move away. Continue to monitor the student for a few seconds and then slowly move away.

If a second student was involved in the inappropriate behavior, the same process should be repeated to make sure that student gets the message and is on task. It is important that each student be dealt with independently.

If the teacher is engaged in whole-class instruction, return to the teaching position, take a couple more deep breaths to stay calm, look at the student, and, if the student shows signs of not being committed to attending to the lesson, wait a bit longer before resuming the lesson. If everything is back in order, resume the lesson. However, make sure the student is kept in the field of vision.

Jones states that this whole process needs to be a deliberate one that is much more slowly paced than is normal in the classroom. The contention is that much more time will be lost if the behavior is not stopped. The most difficult task may be taking a couple of deep breaths before each move. However, this step is important because it helps calm the teacher so that composure is maintained, and it establishes an appropriate pace.

Preferred Activity Time

In just about any classroom, there are activities that are preferred by the students. Allowing students to engage in these activities helps make the classroom experience enjoyable. Everyone likes to have some fun. Jones (2001) suggests that preferred activities are relatively easy to use and have an educational purpose. These activities might be educational games or videos. In addition to the preventive effect of preferred activity time, the loss of an opportunity to engage in preferred activity time is an especially effective consequence. This can be a logical consequence for those who wasted time or who were off task. In elementary schools, students enjoy taking responsibility for different tasks in the classroom, and losing that preferred activity is especially powerful as a consequence for misbehavior.

However, this approach will work only if there are regular times in the classroom when students do have the opportunity to engage in some preferred activities that can be removed. Therefore, teachers need to consider places in the school day when the student can engage in “fun” activities and ways of allowing students some classroom responsibilities.

For example, some secondary school teachers have discovered that students like to listen to music while they are engaged in seatwork. This is a privilege that can

be withheld as a consequence of misbehavior. Secondary students also love to socialize, and providing an opportunity for some of them to quietly engage in conversation with others once they have finished their work is another privilege that can be withheld if necessary.

One elementary teacher had a particularly difficult group of students. She found an activity that most students enjoyed and informed the class that time would be set aside each day to allow the students to engage in that activity. However, time wasted responding to misbehavior would be deducted from this time. When the group leader tested the system and realized that wasted time did mean a loss of the privilege, the class members put pressure on each other to follow the rules. In a short time, the problems almost totally disappeared (Jones, 1987).

Cost-Benefit Analysis

Many behaviors that cause teachers difficulty can be handled rather easily by letting students know that there is a cost associated with their choice. For example, elementary teachers are often at a loss regarding what to do with constant requests to go to the restroom. They feel that it is cruel to deny students permission if they really need to visit the restroom. However, when there are frequent requests, there is a suspicion that the request is really an attempt to avoid work. A common issue in secondary classrooms is when students “forget” to bring appropriate material to class. The solution to these and other similar situations is to shift the responsibility to the student. This is accomplished by associating a cost with the privilege and allowing the student to make the choice.

For example, when students repeatedly requested permission to visit the restroom, one teacher responded with a cheerful “Sure.” Then the teacher made a point of marking down the time. The student was then informed, “Check in with me when you return so that I can mark down the correct amount of time that is missed. You can make that up during preferred activity time” (Jones, 1987). The students are now provided with a clear choice. If there is a legitimate reason to visit the restroom, they will do so. If, however, it was only an excuse to take a break, they have to decide if they are willing to pay the cost. A secondary teacher worked out a “rental” program for students who could not seem to bring material to class. For example, if they did not bring a book to class, they had to leave something with the teacher until they returned the item. Sometimes this would be one shoe. With seniors, it worked well to have them leave their driver’s license. This was a highly prized object that they did not want to have out of their possession. Not surprisingly, this class seldom forgot their books! This clear cost-benefit choice is consistent with logical consequences and keeps responsibility with the students.

Time-Out

Time-out has been a popular response to inappropriate behavior. It has been used more in elementary schools than in secondary schools. Most secondary-level classrooms do not have enough space to set aside a time-out zone. When it is used in secondary schools, it is almost always used schoolwide. These secondary schools often have designated a time-out area for the whole school that is staffed full-time. This is the contemporary equivalent of being sent to the principal's office.

An isolated desk is set aside as time-out space.



In elementary schools, time-out usually involves setting aside an area in the classroom. This is generally a desk or a chair that is separated from the rest of the students. The purpose of time-out is to move the student to an area where he or she will not be able to continue to disturb others. This is not intended as a punishment but as a place students can be removed to in order to remove the stimulus for misbehavior and to allow them time to calm down and reflect (Glasser, 1977). Time-out can be effective when the behavior has been disruptive and when the teacher cannot deal with it.

Students stay in the time-out area until the teacher has an opportunity to meet with them. At this time, conduct a conference and ask the student to identify the behavior that resulted in his or her removal. Second, ask the student if he or she is ready to return to the whole class and what the consequences should be if he or she continues the inappropriate behavior. If the student states he or she is not ready to return, then the conference is terminated and the teacher returns to work.

Time-out can be effective for those students who have attention needs. They want to be a part of the group. They cannot get attention if they are in time out. Most of the time, these students will choose to modify their behavior in order to return to the group.

A word of caution: Students should never be sent to the hall, the playground, or an area where they will not be under direct observation. If students are in a place where they are not supervised, they can engage in dangerous activity or even leave the school grounds. In these situations, the teacher can be held legally liable for any harm that might occur. For example, one student wandered off to watch other students playing ball and was injured by a student throwing rocks. Another left the school grounds and was injured by a car. In situations like this, the teacher who placed the student outside the scope of supervision is placed in a position of high legal risk. However, in spite of this legal risk, we still see the practice of sending students to the hall as a form of time-out in many schools.

Rearrange the Environment

If misbehavior persists, it might be necessary to consider altering the classroom environment in order to remove distractions and make it easier for the students to exercise self-control. Jones (2001) suggests that this is one of the most effective actions that can be taken. Changing the arrangement should take into account several considerations. One focus should be on increasing the ease of using proximity control. Simple changes in the seating arrangement can be done that allow a teacher to quickly get next to every student desk. Another point of focus is to look for dimensions of the environment that might be causing difficulty. Is the student close to the door and tempted to interact with those passing by in the hallway? Is

the student in a position so that he or she can be distracted by what is outside the windows? Perhaps the student is too near the major traffic center in the classroom and he or she is tempted to interact with everyone who passes by. Sitting near the teacher's desk might distract some students because they have to listen in on every teacher conversation. Another choice in rearranging the environment would be to move individuals who are frequently off task into the action zone. This makes it easier for the teacher to monitor their behavior, decreases the distance between the student and the teacher, and usually results in a reduction of off-task behavior. Finally, some students simply cannot sit next to each other. They stimulate each other and may need to be separated.

Teacher–Student Conference

If problems persist in spite of several efforts to change them, it is time for a teacher–student conference. A conference with a student can be relatively short and is best done where there is some privacy. If others are listening, some students feel a need to preserve their image.

The conference, as with other responses, needs to be approached calmly. If the teacher is angry, it is best to remove the student to a time-out area and then wait until the anger subsides before meeting with the student. The purpose of the conference is to engage the student in seeking a solution. It is not to berate, threaten, or shame the student. It is hard to achieve this purpose if the teacher and the student are angry.

During the conference, the teacher needs to start by getting student participation. It is best to begin with questions that focus on what the student was doing. The student should do much of the talking. Teachers can use questions such as “What is the problem?” “What suggestions do you have for preventing the problem?” “What can I do to help you?” and “What do you think I should do the next time this happens?” Some students will try to ignore the teacher or avoid participating and getting involved in the discussion. If they do so, the behavior should be identified with statements such as “I saw you . . .” Communication should be with clarity and firmness, and teachers should share their feelings with statements such as “When I am interrupted when talking, I get frustrated because I have to waste time by stopping the lesson.” If the student is reluctant to suggest solutions, the teacher can suggest solutions that the student would definitely not like. When the student protests, the responsibility should then be shifted back to the student to suggest some other alternatives. The student might be given time to return to his or her seat and write out several alternatives. The teacher needs to be firm and should not let the student get by with superficial responses. For example, if a

student states, “I just won’t do that again,” a response such as “That is not good enough; what if you forget?” forces the student to think more deeply about appropriate consequences.

What Would You Do?

Louis is a teacher’s nightmare. He is a handsome boy that initially is polite to adults. He doesn’t overtly challenge the authority of the teacher. But he appears to be the instigator of many of the disturbances. When he thinks the teacher is not looking, he will knock someone’s books on the floor. He will deliberately elbow students in the back and try to hurt them. One day, he deliberately snapped in half some new pencils of another student. He tries to instigate fights between other students.

- What would you do?
- What do you think Louis is trying to accomplish by these behaviors?
- What specific steps would you take to try to prevent his misbehavior?
- What are some responses that you would use when he does misbehave?

Behavioral Problem Solving

A natural extension of the student conference is that of behavioral problem solving. However, behavioral problem solving can be (and sometimes should be) a whole-class activity. Coloroso (1994) suggests that teaching problem solving is a critical element in helping students develop self-control and inner discipline. Coloroso defines a six-step process for behavioral problem solving. The goal is to use this process with students until they learn how to implement the process on their own. The six steps are as follows:

1. *Define the problem.* The most important step in behavioral problem solving is that of defining the problem. The way in which the problem is defined can stimulate or can inhibit the search for solutions. For example, if a problem is defined simply as a student bothering others, it may miss the root of the problem. In this

situation, the search for solutions might be limited to how to keep the student from bothering others. However, if the root of the problem is that the student is lost and fears failure, then a more rewarding solution would be to find ways of helping the student get the assistance needed in order to achieve success. Defining the problem might take some time for the teacher to question students and allow them to reveal their feelings.

2. *Brainstorm solutions.* Brainstorming involves listing all possible solutions without judgment. This may take some time, and students might need the opportunity to reflect and think about possible solutions. As much as possible, the solutions should come from the students.

3. *Evaluate the possible solutions against a set of criteria.* The role of the teacher is to help the students think through the possible consequences of actions. Coloroso (1994) suggests that the solutions should be evaluated using the criteria of whether or not the consequences of the possible solution are unfair, hurtful, unkind, or dishonest. Other criteria might be that the possible solutions respect the dignity of everyone involved and do not interfere with the rights of others.

4. *Select an option.* After the consequences of all solutions have been explored, those involved in the problem need to choose an option that best addresses the problem, meets the criteria for a good solution, and meets the needs of everyone, including the teacher.

5. *Plan the implementation.* The discussion now needs to center on how the option can be implemented. Again, there should be some criteria for the implementation. It needs to be accomplished without interfering with the rights of others and should be something that can be done easily. Complex plans are almost certain to fail. The implementation needs to maximize the probability of success.

6. *Review the problem.* This step is like a summary. It is a review of the problem definition, the proposed solutions, and what will be done in the future to avoid similar situations. The summary helps students pull the process together and provides them with a model to follow.

Behavioral problem solving obviously takes some time. Therefore, it should not be implemented with minor problems. It should be reserved for more serious problems that interfere with the rights of others. Behavioral problem solving can be implemented with individual students or it can be used in a classroom meeting with the entire class. Classroom meetings are very useful if the problem is relevant

to the entire class or if it involves a number of students. The role of the teacher in classroom meetings is to exercise leadership in making sure the process is implemented and not to dominate the meeting.

Behavioral Improvement Agreements

Behavioral improvement agreements are written agreements between the teacher and the student. When behavioral problem solving has been implemented and students do not follow through, then it might be time to develop a behavioral improvement agreement.

The process is similar to that of behavioral problem solving. If there is more than one behavior that is causing difficulty, the behavioral improvement agreement should focus on the one that is causing the most difficulty. It is important not to try to solve all the problems with one agreement.

The advantage of the written agreement is that it makes the expectations very clear and specifies what each person will do and lists the consequences if the agreement is not kept. These written agreements are especially useful in a conference with the parents or with other professionals. It is important to make sure that the agreement is one that allows the student to succeed. It does not need to be overly complex.

If the agreement is not kept, then the consequences need to be applied and a new agreement developed. Some students will continue to test the teacher until they realize the teacher is not going to give up. If several agreements are tried and are not successful, then additional action needs to be taken. Table 8.2 provides an outline for a behavioral improvement agreement.

Table 8.2 Behavioral Improvement Agreement Form

Student _____

Teacher _____

Date _____

We have met and developed the following agreement to improve the learning climate.

I, (Student name), agree to do the following in order to improve my behavior.

I, (Teacher), promise to help by doing the following:

Failure to follow this agreement will result in the following consequence:

Signatures

Teaching Students to Modify Their Own Behavior

Some students have difficulty with self-control. They do not engage in serious misbehavior, just numerous incidents of minor misbehavior. A useful response is to help these students monitor their own behavior and learn how to take appropriate action to prevent getting into trouble. Several studies have shown that teaching students to monitor their own behavior is effective and has several advantages (McLaughlin, 1976). One advantage is that the students become more aware of their behavior and the control of the behavior is left with the students. Another advantage is that it relieves the teacher from always playing the role of the enforcer.

There are several methods that can be used to teach students to monitor their own behavior. One technique is to provide the students with a series of questions they learn to ask themselves when they are faced with temptation or when they begin to feel anxious or angry. The questions might include the following:

- What is causing me to feel this way?
- What will happen if I don't control myself?
- Is this what I want to happen?
- What can I do to calm down and gain control?

In response to the last question, you might work with the student to identify acceptable responses. For example, some students might be given the freedom to choose to go to the time-out area for a short time voluntarily. They could be allowed to put their heads down on their desks and think of favorite activities or happy thoughts or begin counting and, when they begin to relax and calm down, resume working.

Another method is to have students keep a record of their behavior. For example, they can keep a tally of every time they get out of their seats or every time they talk without permission. They can be prompted when to record. Some students respond positively to this approach. At the conclusion of a given period of time, the teacher and the student review the records. Some students are surprised at the prevalence of the behavior. They are then allowed to set goals and decide how they will reward themselves when they improve.

Implementing self-monitoring requires more than just talking about it. It is useful for the teacher to model and demonstrate the technique. For example, you might model the process by identifying with the class something you would like to change. Some teachers fall into bad verbal habits such as overusing terms such as "okay." This can be discussed with the class. In fact, they might help identify the behavior that needs change. A tally sheet can be kept on the desk and the class can help keep the tally. After a period of time, the tallies can be reviewed with the

class and a plan established to change the behavior. As they observe the teacher modeling the process of changing behavior, students will learn how to apply it to their lives.

Parent Conferences

If misbehavior persists and teacher responses seem to have little impact, it might be time to have a conference with the parents or guardians. Parent conferences often cause teachers a fair amount of anxiety. As a result, many teachers are reluctant to have parent conferences. However, the majority of parents want their children to be successful in school. Although they may initially appear somewhat hostile because they see the actions of their children as a reflection on them and their parenting skills, properly handled parent conferences can have a positive impact and can help teachers and parents become collaborators rather than adversaries.

Parent conferences are most effective if a positive relationship has been established between the teacher and the parent. The problem is that the only time many parents hear from the school is if there is bad news. They need to receive positive comments about their children and the progress they have made. Although this is easier for elementary teachers, who have fewer students and more contact with all students, secondary teachers also need to find ways of establishing positive communication with parents. Some teachers have developed support by sending out regular notes to parents through e-mail.

Effective parent conferences need to be planned. They do not just happen. The first step is to step back and consider the perspectives of the parent. Parents want teachers who are concerned about their children. They want teachers who are firm but fair. Parents also approach meetings with teachers with a certain amount of anxiety. Parents of students who have been chronic discipline problems have usually had several negative experiences with parent conferences and may approach the conference with a definite lack of enthusiasm. Sometimes they are simply frustrated and do not know what to do.

This means that teachers need to make sure that the focus of the conference is on the child and what is best for the child. Teachers need to make sure they are not angry or hostile or blaming the parents. Teachers need to be good listeners and be willing to let the parents share their perspectives and their ideas. This does not mean that the teacher needs to agree to all of their ideas. However, their comments might reveal the causes of the problem so that a more effective plan can be developed.

Teachers need to do some homework before the conference. They need to review records regarding the student, the successes as well as the problems, and look for patterns of behavior and information about the family. Having knowledge about the student and the family will communicate a sense of professionalism and

that the conference has been taken seriously. One other piece of homework might be to keep anecdotal records on the student. These can easily be done by just jotting the date, time, and description of the behavior on note cards. The cards might be shared with parents who try to minimize the misbehavior and believe that the teacher is not being objective. After doing some homework, establish some clear goals for the conference and what you would like from the parent.

Parent conferences need to be conducted in a comfortable spot. Parents may feel that their dignity is assaulted if they are required to sit in a small chair appropriate for primary-level students while the teacher sits in a regular chair behind a desk. The tone for the meeting needs to be one that is cordial and friendly, yet businesslike and professional. This is not the place for gossip or small talk. It also means that you need to consider your body language and nonverbal communication. Such things as lack of eye contact or slouched body posture communicate to the parents that you are not really interested in what they have to say.

The teacher can start the conference in the right direction by thanking the parents for taking time to come to the conference and by communicating his or her concern for the welfare of the student. Inform the parents that you are interested in their perspectives and you would like their advice and assistance. Do not be preachy or hostile. State simply that there is a problem and briefly describe the problem. Then get the parents involved by asking if they can offer any insight as to why the problem is occurring. As with behavioral problem solving, the critical issue is to make sure that there is a good definition of the problem. The teacher should not dominate the conference and should allow ample time for the parents to participate. If a parent is critical of the teacher or the curriculum, clarify the criticisms and express an interest in addressing any mistakes that you might have made and refocus the discussion on the behavior of the student. It is important to keep the conference focused on the problem and not criticisms of the teacher, other teachers, the school, or the other parent. Although those might have a relationship to the problem and might be taken into account when developing a plan of action, the accountability needs to remain with the student. Even though there might be negative dimensions of the student's life, the student still needs to learn that it does not excuse behavior that interferes with the rights of others.

Provide adequate time for the conference so that the parents do not feel rushed. They need to feel that their child is a priority and that the teacher is serious. Make sure that the parents have your undivided attention and that you are listening to their comments. However, do not prolong the conference beyond what is necessary. Always end the conference on a hopeful note. Summarize what has been discussed and identify a plan of action that will be taken by both the parents and the teacher.

After the conference, write down a summary of the conference and the agreements that were made. Then, in a few days, contact the parents and ask if there are any additional questions. Any changes in the behavior should be shared.

Good parent conferences can help build a positive relationship between the parents and the teacher. They can be effective in helping diagnose the problem and in making sure that everyone is working together. Remember, the goal is to help the student, not demonstrate teacher power or win an argument. If you encounter hostile parents, the suggestions in Table 8.3 can help you deal with them in a positive, stress-free way.

Detention

Detention is a time-honored response to serious or persistent behavior problems. Staying after school has long been viewed as the appropriate response when

Table 8.3 When Parents Are Hostile

Some parents come to conferences with a hostile attitude. The probabilities are that they have had negative experiences with schools and want to find a place to place the blame. Hostile parents can evoke impulsive and defensive behavior on the part of the teacher. When it is apparent that a parent is hostile, the teacher needs to exercise a great deal of self-control and remain calm and professional. The following are some considerations in dealing with hostile parents.

1. Be a good listener. Look the parents in the eye, and use nonverbal signals to indicate that you are listening and understand.
 2. If the parent displays feelings and emotional distress, show empathy. Use statements such as “It must be difficult for you,” “I know that there are many challenges parents face today,” and “I understand that you are unhappy.”
 3. If the parent has a legitimate complaint, become his or her ally. Write down their complaint and state that you will work to make sure changes are made.
 4. Do not take criticism personally. Ignore any attacks, and redirect the conference back to the student. Use statements such as “I’m sorry you feel that way about my efforts. However, we are here to discuss _____.”
 5. Ask for parent input: “What would you suggest?” or “How do you think we could solve this problem?” Be open to valid suggestions from the parent.
 6. Be firm and businesslike, not hostile and emotional. It is useful to have data on the behavior of the child. Just state, “Let me share with you information about the behavior,” and present the information. Be firm in letting the parents know that the behavior is unacceptable and changes must be made.
 7. If parents continue to be hostile and abusive, end the conference. You cannot let parents assault your dignity and self-esteem. Simply state, “It is clear that we are not going to be able to resolve this issue. This conference is over and we will schedule another meeting with the school administration.”
-

students misbehave. However, detention should be exercised with care, as there are several potentially negative outcomes.

First, detention is usually a punishment and not a natural or logical consequence for inappropriate behavior. Therefore, detention creates anger and hostility and may provoke a desire to get revenge. In addition, because detention is not a logical consequence, it does not help the student develop more self-control. For example, one of our student teachers noted that one particular student was kept after school day after day. He sat in the classroom and cried, but his behavior did not improve. It is clear that detention in this case was not working and had more negatives than positives. While it instituted punishment for behavior, it was not teaching the student appropriate behavior.

Finally, detention requires consideration of safety and logistics. The world has changed considerably in the past several decades, and it may not be safe for students to make their way home alone. Harm that can come to them on the way home can result in legal challenges. Parents are more concerned about safety and may become quite disturbed if their children do not arrive home when expected. In many schools, there are transportation issues so that if the bus is missed, there is no transportation home. If after-school detention is to be used, parents need to be notified and arrangements made to make sure that the student does have a safe way to get home.

One elementary school changed detention from something negative to something positive. They established what they called a "Kindness Club." The Kindness Club evolved out of the concept of a traffic school. It was an after-school activity that lasted 4 weeks and included students from several classrooms. Students with persistent misbehavior were referred to the Kindness Club. A teacher volunteered to operate the club as a part of her extracurricular duties. She developed a curriculum that focused on anger control, conflict resolution, and reconciliation. Students engaged in role-play and practiced taking the perspectives of others. They learned how to make concrete apologies so that they did something tangible rather than using empty words to restore friendships and reconcile with those they had offended.

Prior to the club meeting, the teacher met with the parents and explained the curriculum. She solicited the help of the parents and had them sign an agreement to make sure the students attended the club meetings. At the end of the month, each student developed a plan about how he or she was going to change. There was a ceremony where certificates were distributed and student growth was celebrated. Because of the interactive nature of the club, students rarely missed the meetings. The Kindness Club had a positive impact on the whole school and was accepted by teachers, parents, and the students (Powell, McLaughlin, Savage, & Zehm, 2001).

If detention is used, it should be used only as a last resort. It should never be applied until there is a conference with the parents so they understand when and how detention will be applied. Students in detention should be engaged in an educational activity. It should not be a time where they are just expected to sit and do nothing.

Involving Others

There are other professionals in the school who can assist teachers when all else seems to fail. Teachers need to realize that they are not psychologists or trained psychiatrists and cannot be expected to solve all problems. Some students in schools have serious problems and need additional help. Seeking assistance is not a sign of failure and is the professional thing to do when problems are serious. Allowing a student to continue on a path of self-destruction is not professional or compassionate. The welfare of the student should be placed ahead of the ego of the teacher.

The beginning step to involving others is to consult with the person in the school who handles serious discipline problems. In most elementary schools, this is the school principal. In secondary schools, it might be an assistant principal or a school counselor. However, before consulting with the person, a description of the problem and steps that have been taken need to be documented. The administrator or counselor needs as much information as possible so he or she can clearly understand the problem and determine how serious it might be. Sometimes there are teachers who simply become overly frustrated and seek the assistance of an administrator for minor problems. When this happens, it is difficult for the administrator or counselor to support the teacher and take actions that result in desired changes. In addition, poor record keeping can lead to difficulties down the road if the problem is serious and other actions are required.

The proper approach is to make an appointment with the appropriate school official. Present the data to the person and explain what has been done to date. Ask the person for specific suggestions on what needs to be done. It is common at this point for the person to offer some specific suggestions. Take those suggestions and document their impact. If there is improvement, this should be noted and a report given back to the administrator. If there is no improvement, the documentation helps establish a framework for next steps.

If the problem appears to be serious, some schools convene a team of individuals to review the problem. This might consist of the teacher, a counselor, the school administrator, and perhaps a school psychologist. Again, it is important that the teacher have good data and documentation for the committee to review. The committee members may then recommend additional steps. Sometimes a counselor

or psychologist asks to visit the classroom and observe the student. This is not always successful because the presence of someone new in the classroom changes student behavior. Additional psychological testing might be done and the committee might then schedule a conference with the parent. They may recommend a different placement or a referral to other agencies that are equipped to deal with these problems. Involving others is an important step in finding a solution if the problem is serious. If serious action such as suspension or expulsion is needed, it is an absolute necessity.

REVIEW OF MAIN IDEAS

1. There are always students in classrooms who have learned to meet their needs and wants through inappropriate behavior. They do not respond to low-profile responses and may actually misbehave even more when attempts are made to stop their behavior. This requires teacher persistence and firmness.
2. A range of alternatives is useful for teachers to develop prior to entering the classroom. Having a range of alternatives that are consistent with the needs and values of the teacher can be extremely valuable when responding to incidents of misbehavior in complex classrooms.
3. Some students are very adept at shifting responsibility for their actions to others. Teachers can help keep the responsibility on students by asking them to define what they are doing and the consequences for doing that. They need to avoid asking "Why?"
4. Both verbal and nonverbal messages are important when responding to persistent misbehavior. Teachers need to develop an "I mean it" demeanor by using clarity and firmness.
5. Limit setting is another approach that emphasizes an "I mean it" demeanor. It involves stopping the class, moving to the misbehaving students, camping out until they get back on task, providing them with a behavioral prompt, and then slowly moving away.
6. Preferred activities are those educational activities that students enjoy. The loss of preferred activity time can be a logical consequence for students who continually waste time or who do not stay on task.
7. When possible, it is useful to shift choices to the student. The cost-benefit analysis spells out the "cost" of a behavior to the students and then allows the students to decide if the benefit they are deriving from their actions is worth the cost.

8. Time-out is frequently used in classrooms. It is most appropriate when a teacher is unable to stop the entire class in order to deal with misbehavior. The student is sent to a time-out area and then a conference follows when there is time to do so.
9. Many problems can be solved by rearranging the environment. This might be done to facilitate proximity control, separate students who cannot exercise self-control, or remove students from an area where there are distractions.
10. Behavioral problem solving can be used with individuals or with the whole class. It includes defining the problem, brainstorming solutions, evaluating possible solutions, making a choice, and evaluating the process.
11. Teaching students to modify their own behavior can be very effective if students learn that there are more constructive ways of fulfilling their needs. It involves helping students identify their feelings and their needs and helping them learn how to search for alternatives to unproductive behavior.
12. Parent conferences are needed when attempts to change student behavior have not worked. The focus of parent conferences should be on cooperation in order to help the student. Teachers and parents need to be working together rather than being adversaries. Considerable planning and thought needs to go into successful parent conferences.
13. Detention is an approach of last resort. It often creates anger and hostility. Some schools have changed detention to an opportunity to teach the students how to control their behavior and how to avoid problems.



APPLICATION AND ENRICHMENT

1. Observe in classrooms and begin developing a list of responses that teachers use when serious or persistent misbehavior occurs. Note the effectiveness of responses. Begin developing a personal range of alternatives.
2. Model using clarity and firmness with colleagues or with a video. Note both the clarity of the verbal message and the firmness displayed in the nonverbal message.
3. Role-play with others the practice of limit setting. Have an individual misbehave and then use moving in, dealing with back talk, camping out, and moving out.

4. Identify those activities during the school day that seem to be preferred by students. If there appear to be none, brainstorm some activities that students might consider preferred activities. State how these might be used as reinforcement for good behavior and as logical consequences for inappropriate behavior.

5. Plan a mock parent conference. Consider how the parents would be contacted, the information that needs to be gathered, and how the parents would be placed at ease and won over as collaborators rather than adversaries.



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