

The power of praise

In a famous piece of research, students with 'a high frequency of problem behaviour' were observed for 20 minutes a day, three days a week from November to June. Their behaviour was recorded as 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' every ten seconds during this time. At the start, some students behaved inappropriately as much as 70% of the time, despite having a competent and experienced teacher.

The teacher adopted various strategies to make the students behave well. Telling them the class rules had little effect; and ignoring inappropriate behaviour made them worse! However, if the students were given the class rules, and their inappropriate behaviour was ignored *but appropriate behaviour was praised*, these very difficult students began to behave well 90% of the time.

*Madsen, C. H. Jr., Becker, W. C. and Thomas, D. R. (1968), 'Rules, praise and ignoring', *Journal of Applied Behavioural Analysis*, 1: 139–50.

Finding the root cause of the problem

If students are bored because their work is too simple, no amount of juggling of rewards and punishments will solve the problem. Even if vigilance and threatened punishments keep the behaviour within tolerable limits, the problem is likely to resurface in a new guise, which may well be even more difficult to deal with. If the root cause of the problem is inappropriate work, then the solution is obvious. Unhappily, the diagnosis of behaviour problems is sometimes very difficult, and occasionally impossible.

The 'adult-to-adult' chat style is perhaps the best method for finding problems and their solutions. Use it one-to-one after the class.

1 *Find the real problem.* This is best done by listening. Even if your first instinct is to strangle the student, assume in the first instance that they are willing and able to solve the problem by themselves. Do not jump in with advice or judgements at this stage. You may give another's point of view, but without implying that you yourself hold that view. Show acceptance non-verbally. You are looking for the reasons for the behaviour you want to change. A key reasoning question is: 'What do you find most difficult ...?'

2 Agree a solution. Give the student the problem and ask them for a solution. 'So what are you going to do about this problem?' If a solution is not forthcoming suggest one yourself, but ask the student if they can think of a better one. Ask for an agreement to carry out the solution, if this is not offered.

3 Set a target. For example: 'So we agree that you will talk to Philippa about your disagreement before next lesson?'

4 Follow up with an evaluation, to see whether the target has been reached. The student is made aware of the fact that the agreed solution is to be checked: 'Good, let me know before next lesson what you and Philippa have agreed between you.'

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Students testing the teacher

This is 'playing up' the teacher. Often students tend to behave increasingly inappropriately until your response is sufficiently firm to prevent further deterioration.

They are experimenting to find out where you draw the lines. The 'case law' which results defines what they can 'get away with'.

Be strict but fair, and *never appear flustered*, even when you are angry. If you deal confidently, consistently and firmly with this playing-up, it will soon lose its attraction for the students. Consider carefully the contents of this and the previous chapter.

If you feel uncomfortable about being assertive, then read the following canon immediately before and after every lesson for a week!

1 It is entirely appropriate for me to use my teacher's authority, as long as I use it in the interests of my students' learning.

2 If I use my teacher's authority effectively, I may well upset some students for a short time. If I use it ineffectively, I will upset them all for a long time.

3 If I do my best to be strict but fair, eventually I will succeed.

If you are challenged, or find yourself in a difficult situation, try hard not to overreact – or under-react. You may find it helpful to make it clear that:

- You have a right to be obeyed: 'I am the teacher here, and what I say goes.'
- You are acting in the learners' best interests: 'I am moving you because it is clear to me that you, and the rest of the class, will learn much better if you sit over here.'

Attention-seeking

Attention-seeking students are usually extrovert, and seem to enjoy the attention of the teacher and the class, even if this attention is negative. Classmates may call such students 'show-offs', while teachers who can't think beyond the inconvenience caused to themselves may categorise them as 'buffoons' or 'class clowns'.

The best strategy is to accept the need for attention, but encourage the student to get this attention through 'legitimate' means. Give lots of attention for learning related activities, and as little attention as possible for the disruptive attention seeking behaviour. The latter is difficult, but the former isn't.

Such students can be very difficult to deal with, though their craving for attention makes them easy to 'bribe':

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The teacher uses formal authority ineffectively

If your response to the kind of 'testing' mentioned above is not vigilant or firm enough, you may experience rudeness, open lack of respect and even outright defiance.

You may also notice that many students who once behaved reasonably well are beginning to join in, and the riot syndrome – a negative 'ripple effect' – causes the misbehaviour to spread.

Student stress

How do *you* behave when you are under stress? I expect you lack concentration, are self-centred and lacking in consideration for others, and are irrational and short-tempered. If this is a perfect description of some of your students, then their problem behaviour may be stress-related. Their stress may be due to difficult circumstances at home.

How can we help a student deal with stress? Understanding the cause of their behaviour difficulties may help, but you can also try one-to-one talking and – most of all –

listening. Ask them if they are under stress, but don't take their difficulties on yourself; refer them to their pastoral tutor and, if necessary, to a counselling service. Talk to them about their problem behaviour the next day when they are calm; this is good practice for any recurring problem behaviour. Ask the student how you should both cope when they 'fly off the handle', and how you could both prevent this happening.

They may benefit from being isolated from 'friends' who irritate them.

You may be able to negotiate in advance a 'cooling-off' strategy, in which, after misbehaviour, you ask them to sit alone for a few minutes. In return, you agree not to tackle them about the misbehaviour until they have calmed down.

Dealing with problems that won't go away

Before explaining the strategies that can be used to deal with really persistent problems, I will deal with some of the techniques that may be useful.

Talking to students one-to-one

If a problem is persistent, you should obviously talk to the student about it. But how? Try the straight-talking adult-to-adult style first, even if your every instinct is to tell the student off (if not strangle them). Anger is rarely your best adviser. However, there will be times when an 'adult-to-child' approach is more appropriate.

Escalating your response to repeated inappropriate Behaviour

If you have a persistent problem with a class or individual, your response to that problem may be ineffective. You must change the response if it doesn't work! This idea is simple but critical, and often overlooked. If you find yourself saying 'For heaven's sake, how many times have I told you not to ... ?', then stop and think: why are you using a response you have proved does not work? A response to misbehaviour should not be tried more than two or three times consecutively with the same student. After this, change or escalate your response, or threaten to do so.

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Look at the student.

- Sustain eye contact.
- Move towards the student, maintaining eye contact.
- Remain close to the student.
- Shake your head or frown while looking at the student.
- Stop talking and look at the student until they notice your attention; sustain eye contact in silence, then continue.
- Use the student's name without explanation: 'Then, John, I'll look at Act II.'
- Ask the student a work-related question.
- Ask the student to explain some aspect of the work to the rest of the class.
- Stop what you are doing, and ask the student in a firm voice to stop the behaviour.
- This can be done in public, but is best one-to-one.
- Do the above with more non-verbal pressure – e.g. sustained eye contact in silence, stern voice – while standing close to the student. Ask the student a question about the behaviour (PEP).

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