

General Methods for Responding to Disruptive Behavior

1. *Arrange seating patterns so that you can see and easily move to be near all students.* Try to arrange the classroom so you can see all students and can move comfortably about the classroom. If you create a time to work for an extended period with a small group, try to arrange their backs to the class with you facing the class.

2. *Scan the class frequently in order to notice and respond to potential problems or minor disruptions.* One of the most difficult tasks for beginning teachers to learn is how to attend to more than one thing at a time. Teachers frequently become so engrossed in working with a group or an individual student that they fail to notice potential problems stemming from a frustrated student or a minor argument. Although it is important to attend to the student(s) being taught, teachers must learn to frequently scan the room.

3. *The disruptive influence of the teacher's intervention should not be greater than the disruption it is intended to reduce.* Teachers often create more disruptions with their attempts to discipline students than the students are causing themselves. Whenever possible, ignore such minor disruptions as a dropped book or overuse of a pencil sharpener. If an individual student continually creates minor disruptions, this problem can be dealt with effectively by discussing the issue privately with the student. If many class members are involved in low-key disruptive behavior, the behavior can be discussed during a class meeting.

4. *An inappropriately angry teacher response creates tension and increases disobedience and disruptive behavior.* Both Kounin (1970) and Brophy and Evertson (1976) found evidence of a "negative ripple effect" associated with harsh teacher criticism. Rather than improving student behavior, students tend to become more anxious and disruptive in classes characterized by overly harsh discipline. Therefore, although firmness can have a positive effect on classroom behavior, it should be associated with teacher warmth, politeness, and explanations.

5. *A positive ripple effect is associated with a calm and immediate response to a problem.* When teachers react calmly and quickly to a student's disruptive behavior, other students respond by improving their own behavior.

6. *When misbehavior occurs, the first step is to make contact quietly with the student.* This can be done with a glance, by moving close to the student, by touching the student on the shoulder, or by asking the student for an on-task response. When asking the student to respond, always ask a question the student can answer. If the student has obviously not been listening to the discussion,

you will embarrass the student by asking, "Sam, what do you think about Tom's answer?" Asking Sam a new question, however, or paraphrasing Tom's statement and asking Sam for his opinion can productively reintegrate Sam into the mainstream of the classroom activity. Another approach to making a positive initial contact with the student is to praise a positive behavior that competes with the negative behavior. Rather than criticize a student's off-task behavior, praise the student the moment she or he begins to work on the assignment or focus on the class discussion.

7. *Remind students of the classroom rule or procedure they are not demonstrating.* Rather than yelling, "Chris, stop bothering Mary while she is working!" simply walk over to Chris and ask quietly, "Chris, do you know which rule you are not following?" You could also point to the chart you developed regarding what it looks like and sounds like to be an effective student and ask the student to please use these skills. Similarly, if an entire class is becoming disruptive or lining up without having cleared their desks, ask the class to describe their behavior and mention any classroom procedures that are being neglected.

8. *When one or two students are being extremely disruptive, it is best to focus the other students' attention on their tasks and then talk privately with the disruptive students.* You might say, "Would you all please help me by working quietly on your spelling sentences while I help Tom and Bob solve their problems?" By handling the situation calmly and positively, you indicate your competence, which in turn will have a calming effect on the other students.

9. *Provide students with choices.* When responding to students who are upset, it is often helpful to provide them with choices. This responds to students' needs for competence and power and helps to reduce their perception that someone is trying to control them or is going to do something to them. For example, if a student appears unready to leave an area, instead of saying, "I'll give you ten more seconds to leave this area or you will be in even more trouble!" we might say, "Looks like you're pretty upset right now. Would you rather wait in my room or the counseling office to chat about this and work out a solution?"

During a recent workshop conducted by the senior author, a Nebraska teacher shared how she had used her new skills on giving choices while working with her son who had been having difficulty with arguments and accompanying temper tantrums when asked to run errands with his mother. Instead of bribing or threatening him, she attempted sending an I-message—her need to go, her desire to have him with her—and asking him what would make the trip more enjoyable. The boy indicated that he was hungry and would like a snack for the ride.

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The mother asked him what he thought would be a healthy snack that would be neat enough for the car. The boy responded that he thought an apple would be healthy and not too messy. The mother then asked him if there was anything else that would make the trip more pleasant, and he said he would like to bring a new play figure his father had recently purchased for him. The mother said the boy was delighted at his involvement in the decisions and that, unlike many of their recent excursions, they had a very enjoyable time together.

10. *Remind the student of the positive consequences associated with behaving in a prosocial manner.* For example, you might say, "If you ask in a positive way, he might let you play with the blocks," or, "If you can wait in line without bumping anyone, we'll get out to recess sooner and have more time to play."

11. *Reinforce behavior of students close by who are behaving in a desired manner.* For example, you could say, "Juan, it really helps me teach the lesson when you sit quietly and look at the overhead. Thank you."

12. *See if the student needs some assistance, acknowledge this, and provide the assistance.* For example, if a student is acting out and you notice she is having difficulty because she cannot draw a straight line, you could provide the student with a ruler. This type of quick environmental analysis can go a long way toward reducing behavior problems. This can be supplemented by a comment such as, "When you have the right equipment, you really do well, Luanna. Next time you have trouble, try to think about what would help you, so you can solve the problem rather than getting upset."

13. *Ignore the behavior.* Ignoring is best only for behaviors that cause only limited interference with your ability to teach or students' abilities to learn. Although this strategy can be effective for minor behaviors, it also suggests you are not aware of the misbehavior or that you do not care about the behavior. In addition, the behavior may be reinforced by attention from other students. It is best to ignore only minor misbehavior and to associate this ignoring with praise for appropriate behavior.

14. *Use a signal to indicate you would like the behavior to stop.* This might involve pointing to the classroom rules or your list of what it looks like and sounds like to be an effective student, or simply a surprised or confused look—to indicate you're surprised to see such a helpful student disrupting the class. We suggest that you do not use the evil eye or dirty look many teachers have been taught. We would hope this is not what is used by colleagues at a faculty meeting or family members at a holiday meal. Likewise, it is not a behavior that enhances students' self-esteem and is not a desirable classroom intervention.

15. *Use proximity control.* Simply move closer to a student who is misbehaving. This can ideally be done as you continue to teach.

16. *Place a small note (sticky notes work well) on the student's desk.* This might involve an invitation to talk with you when the lesson is over, a statement that you will soon be switching to an activity the student particularly enjoys, or a strategy the student might use to solve the problem.

17. *Call on the student or involve him by using his name in a story or question.* Sometimes mild inappropriate behavior is a sign of boredom or lack of engagement. Simply providing a brief engagement can reconnect the student with the lesson.