

SUE COWLEY

GETTING THE

WHY DO STUDENTS MISBEHAVE?

BUGGERS

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

TO BEHAVE 2

AND WHAT SHOULD I NOT DO ABOUT IT?

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER



1 Basics of behaviour management

What are the basics?

In this first chapter, we're going to take a look at the basics, the initial 'ground rules' of behaviour management. These are the fundamentals, the techniques that should become intuitive if your teaching style is going to encourage good behaviour on a consistent basis. Although much of what follows may seem self-evident, it is always worth while refreshing your memory, or looking at this section to check whether something really basic is going wrong. In reality, many experienced teachers already do these things so automatically that the strategies become a subconscious part of our teaching. Most recently qualified teachers will have been taught about behaviour management in college, but it can be difficult to match all that theory with the reality of being in the classroom. So what do the 'basics' actually mean in practice? Let's take a look and see.

Be definite 'I know what I want.'

Be aware 'I know what will happen if I don't get what I want.'

Be calm and consistent 'I'm always polite and fair to you.'

Give them structure 'I know where we're going.'

Be positive 'You're doing great.'

Be definite

'I know what I want.'

Being definite in your teaching is all about knowing what your expectations are of your students. Like predators sensing a weakness in their prey, students seem to be instinctively aware of

vulnerability and uncertainty in their teachers. Knowing exactly what you want allows you to communicate an air of confidence to your class. From the moment you walk through the door, you must 'show no fear'. You should be so certain of what you want from your students, that there is no room for them to argue, no chance for them to 'step out of line'. And if your students do misbehave, this should be treated with a suitable level of amazement and surprise: are they really defying your expectations?!

In addition to being definite about what you want in your own mind, do make sure that you also let your students in on the secret. It is only if you tell them exactly what you expect and require from them, that they can try to do what you want. This decision-making process should take place before your first lesson with the class, to avoid any suggestion of uncertainty on your part. (This is one of the reasons why behaviour management does become much easier with experience: you will already have made these important decisions in previous years.)

Interestingly, the point about being definite came up frequently in the student interviews that I conducted. The children explained that if a teacher seems uncertain, acts as though they are scared, or tries not to get on the 'wrong side' of their students, the children have far less respect for that teacher. Students want certainty from the adult figures in their lives. They want you to create and enforce boundaries that give them a feeling of solidity. This is perhaps particularly true for your most difficult students, who may lack structure in their home lives, and who may test all the adults that they meet to see whether they truly care for them.

Of course, there will be situations and schools where, despite your best intentions, the students simply refuse to comply, and I will deal with some more advanced strategies later on in this book. But even with the most difficult students, these approaches will help you to cope. So what exactly do you need to be definite about? Here are some thoughts and examples that you might find useful, covering a range of classroom management issues, at a range of points during the lesson.

Entering the room

1. How should the students enter the room? For example, do they

- line up outside and wait for the teacher to invite them in;
- enter as they arrive if the teacher is in the classroom?

The first strategy is probably preferable in 'difficult' schools, as it allows the teacher to structure the entry of the class into the room, and it also demonstrates a high level of control to the students. However, if you are likely to have to wait a long time for those arriving late to your lesson, you might want to consider the second possibility.

2. What do the students do once they are inside your classroom? Do they

- go directly to their seats, get out their books, pencil cases, diaries, etc, and wait for the register to be taken or the lesson to begin;
- collect any equipment they need and start work immediately?

Although the first suggestion might seem to offer a more 'controlled' start to the lesson, the second option could actually help you to engage a difficult class more quickly. If you are planning some whole class teaching, the first method may suit you better. However, if the class is going to be doing project work, they could actually get started immediately, leaving you free to deal with any troublemakers or latecomers. If you are in the unfortunate situation of teaching classes with many badly behaved students in them, then at least this method allows those students who are motivated to get on with their work, rather than listening to you disciplining the class.

The lesson

1. How will the lesson start? Will it be

- with the register being taken;
- with homework being collected in;
- with the teacher explaining the aims of the lesson?

The choice of whether to 'plunge' straight into the lesson, or to deal with administration first, will depend very much on the type of

class you are teaching. If you are dealing with a restless bunch of youngsters, it may be counter-productive to demand that they hand their homework in first. If homework has not been done, you will then set up a series of confrontations that might best be avoided.

Taking the register at the start of each lesson is a habit I've formed (and stuck with) during my teaching career. I have found it to be a very useful way of pulling the students together and setting up definite expectations of the class. However, it really should be done with the class sitting silently, while the teacher calls out the names and the students answer. This will demonstrate your control, and impose a calm and ordered start on the lesson. The problem is, you can't get halfway through taking the register and then give up because your students won't be quiet. If you do, they will have 'won' at the first hurdle. 'I've started, so I'll finish' must be your maxim!

2. How will the children approach their work? Will it be

- in complete silence at all times;
- chatting quietly with the person sitting next to them;
- talking as they wish with no restrictions;
- in silence for a period of time, then taking a short break.

The choice you make from the options above will depend on a whole range of factors: the type of children you teach, the school ethos within which you work, the style and persona you wish to put across to your class, and so on. I would always recommend starting off with a class working in complete silence, because it is easy enough to relax from this as a reward for good behaviour and work. It is much harder to move back from allowing your students to talk as they wish, if you do find the noise levels getting out of hand.

3. How will the lesson finish?

- the students are dismissed a few at a time;
- all the students stand behind their chairs and wait to be dismissed;
- the class leaves when the bell goes.

The first of these options allows the teacher to keep behind any students who they need to talk to for whatever reason. The second option offers a very controlled ending to the lesson, and in addition the teacher can check the floor for rubbish and also get the chairs pushed in, leaving the classroom looking orderly. At times, however, you will be so relieved that the class are leaving, that you just allow them to go, wiping your brow in relief at the same time!

Be aware

'I know what will happen if I don't get what I want.'

When things do go wrong, as inevitably they will on occasions, you should be fully aware of what you will do to correct the situation. Again, you must be certain of this: behaviour 'X' will lead to sanction 'Y' and so on. The students must also be clearly aware of what will happen if they do choose to misbehave. Again, it is crucial to let them in on the secret by explaining the exact connection between their misbehaviour and the sanction they will receive. This helps avoid any suggestion that you are unfair: if the children understand the rules and the sanctions, it is up to them whether they obey or not. There is more information on using sanctions in Chapter 5, but let's look briefly now at how you might deal with a student who refuses to do what you want.

If a student does challenge your expectations, try taking the following steps:

- Be *definite* about what you want (and stick to it!).
- Remain calm at all times.
- Stay polite at all times (however difficult this is!).
- State your expectations clearly.
- Clarify any possible misunderstandings.
- State how the student's behaviour is not meeting your expectations.
- State what will happen if they continue to defy you.
- Refuse to be distracted from your original point (for instance by the child who tries to deflect the blame on to a classmate).
- Depersonalize the sanction, by making it clear that the student is forcing you to punish them, rather than it being a personal attack by you on them.

- Try if possible to sound rather sad or disappointed about actually having to impose the sanction.
- If necessary, apply the sanction.
- If possible, allow the student to 'win' back from their position by offering a 'way out'.

Here's a brief example to show what I mean.

John arrives at the Drama Studio and walks straight in, without taking off his shoes. The teacher has already set the rule that the students must take off their shoes before entering the room.

Teacher: John, please go back outside and take off your shoes.

John: I can't, Miss.

Teacher: We have a rule in drama that we must take off our shoes.

John: But I've sprained my ankle, Miss. I really can't take them off.

Teacher: Do you have a note about your ankle?

John: No.

Teacher: Then please go back outside and take off your shoes.

John: No. I won't.

Teacher: If you won't take off your shoes, then you will force me to give you a detention, John.

John: That's not fair.

Teacher: Please go back outside and take off your shoes. Then I won't have to give you a detention.

John: No, I won't take off my shoes.

Teacher: Then I'm afraid you're forcing me to give you a detention for five minutes after the lesson.

John: Oh please don't miss.

Teacher: Tell you what, John, go and take your shoes off right now and behave really well during the lesson, and I'll probably be able to forget that detention. Okay?

John: Alright then.

Just to show how differently this encounter might have turned out if the teacher didn't follow the guidelines, let's return the scene ...

Teacher: John, go back outside and take off your shoes.

John: I can't, Miss.

Teacher: What do you mean, 'I can't'? Of course you can.

John: But I've sprained my ankle, Miss. I really can't take them off.

Teacher: Don't be so stupid.

John: Don't call me stupid.

Teacher: Look, just go outside and take off your shoes. Now!

John: No. I won't.

Teacher: Then you've got a detention with me after school.

John: That's not fair. I'm not coming. Get stuffed!

Be calm and consistent

'I'm always polite and fair to you.'

All of us welcome calmness and consistency. We like to know what to expect from other people, and it throws us if the reaction varies from occasion to occasion. For some poorly behaved children, this is the problem they face at home: they never know what the reaction to their behaviour (good or bad) will be. Our duty as professionals is to provide them with a consistent and considered role model of adult behaviour and responses.

Of course it is not easy for teachers to be fair and polite on a daily basis. We are, of course, only human! If you are tired you may react badly to an incident of misbehaviour. However, if you can remain tirelessly calm and consistent at all times, there will be far less possibility of serious confrontation, and you will also avoid creating unnecessary stress for yourself. An excellent rule of thumb is to treat your children as you would treat another adult, for instance if you worked in an office, no matter how poorly your children behave towards you.

In interviews, the concept of 'fairness' came up repeatedly. Students felt that they, or their friends, were unfairly singled out, and once they had misbehaved, they were picked on over and over again. Similarly, there was a strong feeling that 'bad' teachers had their 'pets'. Perhaps we are all too often unaware of how our students actually perceive us. If we are honest, because we are human, we do in fact like some students more than others. The secret, of course, is not to let them know by showing our feelings in the way we behave.

When we were discussing sanctions, the students also mentioned that whole class punishments were extremely unfair, and of course they were right! Why on earth should they all be punished for the misbehaviour of a small minority? Let's take a look now at some of the times when you most need to be calm and consistent with your students:

- *The way your lessons run:* As we will see in the next chapter, it is important that your lessons follow a pattern, and one that is as calm and consistent as possible. This pattern will allow your students to arrive at your classes, knowing exactly what to expect from you, and knowing that you will remain cool whatever the circumstances. If their expectations are met on a regular basis, they will begin to feel a sense of security in your company, and will behave better as a result.
- *The way you interact with your students:* A calm, measured approach, and one that is similar every time that they meet you, will help your students feel secure in your lessons. On the other hand, if they arrive at your class never knowing what sort of mood you are going to be in, they will be in a constant state of uncertainty about what to expect from you. However hard it might be, do try to be in a good mood at all times!
- *The way you sanction your students:* The punishments that you give need to be applied calmly, to help reduce the tension that anyone feels when they are being disciplined. In addition to this, your sanctions must be seen to be fair and consistent. It can be tempting to punish a generally well behaved student less harshly than one who often misbehaves, but this is something that teachers should avoid at all costs. The same infringement should nearly always result in the same reprimand. (As we will see later on in the book, there are certain situations where you need to be flexible with your sanctions, for instance when dealing with a particularly troubled or confrontational student.)

Give them structure

'I know where we're going.'

Our natural impulse is to place a structure on our lives – a daily

pattern that gives us a feeling of safety and security. For many of the most difficult students in our schools, this structure is exactly what is missing from their world. At home, their parents or guardians may not have set boundaries for them, or they may constantly 'move the goalposts', reacting in a variety of different ways to the same types of misbehaviour. School can offer such young people a refuge, a place where they meet adults who give them suitable and consistent guidelines about what 'good' behaviour actually means.

How, then, do we as teachers offer our students 'structure'? What this means is that you must have a very clear idea of where you are going with your class or classes. Your teaching must be structured, not only in terms of lesson content, but also in the way you organize your class and the way you control the behaviour of your students. Once you have a clear structure in your own mind, this clarity will be apparent to your class through your high level of awareness and confidence. In addition, you should make it blatantly clear to your students at every stage exactly how and why this structure is being used.

If you can achieve this strong sense of purpose, your students will know what to expect when they come to your class, and they will look forward to spending time with you. If their expectations are met every time they come into contact with you, they will start to view you as a stable feature of their lives, and their behaviour will become much more predictable and controllable. By repeating patterns of good behaviour within the structured environment that you offer them, these will become almost like reflex actions, requiring little or no input from the teacher.

For instance, if you are unavoidably late to class, you may be delighted to find your students lined up outside, awaiting your arrival. Habits quickly become ingrained, and the teacher can start to use quick non-verbal signals to indicate his or her wishes to the class. (For instance, a hand signal at the end of the lesson to show that the children should stand behind their chairs.)

Let's look now at some aspects of your teaching that you can learn to structure:

- *The way your lessons will start and finish:* This aspect of your teaching is explored in the section entitled 'Be definite'

earlier in this chapter. If the lesson starts and finishes in exactly the same way every time you see a class, they will soon repeat these patterns automatically, making your life easier. For instance, if you start every lesson by taking the register, your children will soon learn to fall silent at the appropriate moment.

- *What will happen during the lesson:* Although the actual content of your lessons will vary according to what you are teaching that day, the way your lessons proceed will stay fairly constant. For instance, you might structure your lessons so that your classes are asked to work quietly, staying in their seats and putting up their hands if they do have any questions.

- *The aims and content of your lessons:* If your students are to be well motivated about their work, they must know what is going to happen during the lesson and why they need to learn these things. A simple way to achieve this is to state the aims or objectives of the lesson right at the start, and keep referring back to these throughout the class time. (Some teachers write a list of learning objectives on the board.) In this way, the students have a very clear idea about what is going to happen during the lesson, giving them a sense of structure to hang on to. By explaining to them why the work is important, they will also see a purpose and direction for the work.

- *Information about the work that you want your students to achieve:* In addition to understanding the content and purpose of the lesson, you should also give the students a very clear idea about exactly how much they need to achieve, and to what standard the work must be completed. One very useful way of doing this that was mentioned in the student interviews (see Chapter 9) is the teacher who says:

- This is the work you *must* do.
- This is the work you *should* do.
- This is the work you *could* do.

By dividing the work into these three categories, the students are given clear targets to aim at. The more able will probably finish all three parts of the work. The less able students know that there is a certain amount that must be completed if they are to avoid a sanction.

- *Details of what your students have actually achieved during the lesson:* It is always gratifying to look back on the time we have spent working on something and to feel a sense of achievement. Make it very clear to your students what they have achieved, and take the time to reward them for their hard work. In this way they will leave your lessons with a positive sense of success, and will be more likely to behave and work well the next time you see them.

Be positive

'You're doing great!'

Every teacher knows the mantra, 'stress the positive'. To be honest, it can sometimes feel as though we are praising our students for just about anything, to try to get them 'on our side'. I believe this is a mistake. If we set our sights low, then this low level is all our students will aim for. Whereas if we have high standards, and expect great things, our students will learn to strive for their best. Being positive is not just about praising your students, it is also about having a positive outlook during your time with them. The discriminating use of praise, and the ability to remain relentlessly positive, will help you a great deal with managing behaviour. In addition, it will probably make you a far less stressed out teacher!

Here are a few tips for staying positive with your students:

- always greet your class with a positive expectation, such as 'I just know you're going to do some fantastic work today';
- expect the best from your children, rather than anticipating the worst;
- frame everything you say in a positive light;
- try to avoid accusing your students or criticizing them;
- never use sarcasm – it really is 'the lowest form of wit', and can hurt children badly;
- react to misbehaviour by suggesting a positive alternative;
- use individual praise to encourage the whole class;
- use rewards in preference to sanctions as far as possible;
- constantly set targets to offer positive ways for your students to improve;

- see completion of targets as a chance to give a reward.

Let's look briefly at two examples of the same situation, a teacher inviting a class into the room, to show the difference between a positive and a negative approach.

Negative

'Come on, hurry up! Why are you being so slow? Come on, come on, we've got loads to get through today and we'll never get everything done if you're this slow. What's wrong with you? Why are you making so much noise?'

The problem here is the negative way that the teacher is talking to the students. Immediately, they are criticized for being slow. The teacher then creates a negative feeling about the work they will be doing, by putting the blame on the students for not being able to get through it all. Finally, she uses two negative questions that both suggest the students are always this bad. By starting the lesson in such a negative frame of mind, the teacher's expectations may well be met!

Positive

'Right, if you can all come in as quickly as possible. I've got some really exciting things for you to do today, and we need to get started straight away, so that we can get through them all. That's an excellent level of noise. Well done. Now let's see if you can be even quieter.'

Here, instead of accusing the students of being 'slow', the teacher tells them how she wants them to come into the room. She then creates a sense of purpose and interest, by telling them that she has some 'really exciting' things planned for them. Finally, she praises them for the low level of noise, but sets them the challenge of being even quieter. By starting the lesson in this way, a positive atmosphere will hopefully be created and sustained.

2 Managing the first meeting

Why is the first meeting so important?

Your first meeting with any class offers you the chance to sow the seeds for an easy year, or to take the first step on the road to disaster. Every teacher must surely know that hollow feeling in the pit of the stomach, as you let a new class into your room, aware that what you do in that very first meeting will have such a long-term impact. Often, both the teacher and the students will be feeling at their most defensive in the first lesson together. You may be anticipating poor behaviour from a 'difficult' class; they may be expecting you to dislike them if they know that other teachers feel negatively towards them.

With many classes, the first few meetings offer you a 'honeymoon period', where your students are getting to know you, 'checking you out' before revealing their true colours. If this is the type of class you have, make sure you don't start out with an overly relaxed attitude. If you do, you may find that a few lessons into the year, when the students have made a decision about your style and personality as a teacher, they start to take advantage of your relaxed approach and begin to misbehave.

On the other hand, you may find yourself in a school where the students will misbehave for new teachers, testing them to see whether they can withstand the ordeal! This is obviously the more difficult situation to be in, and if you do find yourself at this type of school, you should very quickly turn to others to help and support you. Some ideas about how you might do this are given in Chapter 11.

What do you need to know before the first meeting?

Teachers are put in a very difficult position at the start of a school