The Proactive Teacher: Five Positive Ways to Reduce Disruptive Classroom Behaviors

Learning happens much more effectively in classrooms where discipline problems do not get in the way of good instruction. Here are five basic guidelines that teachers can follow which are likely to head off many behavior problems before they happen:

1. **Establish personal connections with students.** Positive relationships between adults and students form the foundation of any effective classroom behavior management system. Instructors can make individual students feel that they are valued members of the classroom community by greeting them by name as they enter the classroom and giving equal attention to all students when calling on them. Offering specific praise to students who do a good job on a class assignment or jotting encouraging notes on homework assignments can also convey a sense that the teacher monitors and cares about the academic success of each child. For those students with whom teachers find it particularly difficult to ‘connect’, Allen Mendler and Richard Curwin, developers of the *Discipline With Dignity* program, recommend the “2 by 10” strategy. Every day for 10 consecutive days, the instructor approaches the student and engages in 2 minutes of casual conversation. By the end of the 10 days, the teacher has usually established a personal connection with the student.

Teachers can foster classwide relationship-building by regularly holding class meetings to discuss issues important to students. It is vital, of course, that the teacher facilitate these meetings in a manner that allows all students to feel safe, gives every student a chance to be heard, and prevents any individual student from being singled out for criticism or ridicule. As another way to encourage classroom communication, teachers sometimes put out ‘feedback’ boxes into which students can drop anonymous notes to bring issues that they view as important to the attention of the instructor.

2. **Set Up Simple, Clear Classroom Rules.** Rules are important in the classroom because they clearly state teacher expectations. In fact, classrooms with poorly defined rules are significantly more likely to experience student behavior problems that those that have well-defined rules.

Rules for classroom conduct should be few in number (e.g., 5-7 rules), consistent with the school-wide behavior code, and stated in positive terms (e.g., “Walk quietly when passing through the halls” is better than “Don’t talk in the halls.”) Students are more motivated in following rules in they help to come up with those rules in the first place.

3. **Individualize to Accommodate Student Differences.** Students who are unsuccessful in academics can become frustrated and respond by acting out, avoiding, or escaping the classroom whenever they are asked to do schoolwork. Teachers can increase student investment in learning and decrease classroom problem behaviors by making adjustments as needed for students who are struggling academically. Some common-sense ideas for individualizing instruction include:
• checking for appropriate instructional match. The teacher assesses the child’s skills to verify that the child is placed in instructional material that he or she actually has the skills to do.

• ensuring ongoing student success. The student is given homework or in-class assignments with items that he or she is very likely to be able to complete successfully.

• setting up routines for students to get classroom help. When a student becomes ‘stuck’ on a classroom assignment, he or she can follow clear, teacher-approved guidelines for getting help in a timely manner (e.g., quietly asking 3 peers for assistance and – if still unsuccessful -- seeking help from the teacher).

4. **Build a Network of Staff Support.** Teachers sometimes have to reach out to other building staff for support when dealing with difficult student behaviors. For example, an instructor may decide to refer a student to the principal’s office or to seek out the school psychologist to get additional ideas for managing a child’s behaviors. Teachers who put time into learning about and accessing outside supports are better able to manage even the more challenging students within their classrooms than those who neglect building these collaborative supports.

5. **Create a Classroom Crisis Response Plan.** The only sure fact about behavior management in classrooms is that unforeseen events will occur. One proactive step that teachers can take to manage the unexpected, however, is to develop their own individualized plan for reacting to crisis situations that may arise in the classroom. For example, how should the teacher respond if, during a classroom activity, several students become involved in a physical fight? Or, what is an appropriate way for the teacher to react if a student should suddenly leave the classroom without permission and run from the building?

As a starting point to developing a classroom crisis plan, the teacher should become familiar with the school-wide Crisis Response Plan and understand how he or she is to handle students in such situations as bomb threats. The instructor should also be knowledgeable about the school’s discipline policy. The teacher will then think about the kinds of emergency situations that are most likely to occur in his or her classroom, taking into account such factors as the behavioral profiles and developmental levels of students. The instructor can then develop one or more appropriate responses for each emergency situation that he or she has identified.

As an example, a teacher may identify student fights in the classroom as a possible emergency situation. After reviewing the school-wide crisis plan, the teacher understands that he or she is to contact the main office via the intercom and request assistance for any classroom emergency. The instructor may then decide to approach several other staff members who have rooms in the same hallway as his or her classroom. As a group, these instructors might agree on a pre-arranged signal that any one of them may use to get immediate assistance from a colleague in an adjoining room if an emergency should occur.

Of course, the teacher should review any classroom crisis response plan with the building principal to ensure that the classroom plan is fully in alignment with building and district policies.

**Reference**