Responding to Student Misbehavior

According to Harry Wong’s book The First Days of School: How to be an Effective Teacher (2005), dealing with misbehavior from students is a reality for every teacher. The potential for student behavior problems may be significantly reduced by the creation of a positive classroom culture and the communication of clear expectations for conduct. Positive, preventative measures can help to decrease or eliminate scenarios in which generally well-behaved students are tempted to join in with the misbehavior of students who are in need of specialized, individual attention. Instructions are clarified and emphasized with the utilization of presentation and communication techniques, such as voice control, optimal body language, and visual cues to emphasize instructions. Unfavorable interactions between students may be reduced by good classroom layout and careful grouping of students for collaborative work.

Difficult situations and misbehavior will arise. According to Charlotte Danielson’s criteria in The Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument (2011), “Even experienced teachers find that their students occasionally violate one or another of the agreed-upon standards of conduct.” Teachers need to be aware of and become confident in the use of de-escalation strategies and recognize signs that may be the precursors to serious confrontations. Advice from Tunnecliffe (2007) reminds teachers that “there are no guarantees, in terms of dealing with difficult and aggressive behaviour.” However, the chances of a favorable outcome from a challenging classroom situation are increased by following effective procedures and learned responses. Deep knowledge of students' individual needs may help to identify special accommodations for students with behavioral problems and remove triggers that prompt misbehavior.

As reinforced through Glasser’s research (1998), teachers are not alone when dealing with serious cases of misbehaving students. Experienced teacher colleagues, school counselors, social workers, and school psychologists may be available to provide support for the student and advice for the teacher. Working in tandem with the student’s family helps deepen knowledge of the student’s needs and brings more consistency to the implementation of supportive strategies.
Information Alignment

Materials presented in this eBook align with the following:

Module Questions

- How can preventative strategies promote appropriate classroom behaviors?
- How does utilizing external resources help in responding to student misbehavior?
- What behavior intervention approaches can be implemented to promote appropriate classroom behaviors?
- How can family involvement and deep knowledge of students' individual needs support and reinforce effective responses to misbehavior?

Learning Outcomes

- Identify appropriate external resources for responding to student misbehavior.
- Investigate and develop strategies and tools for behavior intervention and family involvement in interventions.
- Develop responses to misbehavior that are sensitive to student's individual needs.
- Implement preventative strategies that promote appropriate classroom behaviors.

Topic Focus

Classroom Intervention Strategies (Instructional, prevention, and intervention)

- Utilizing appropriate time for tasks and feedback (task duration)
- Proactively involving physical activity and differentiated lessons with follow-up assessments
- Implementing consistent use of rules, procedures, and routines in the classroom
- Employing/modeling appropriate acceptable alternative behaviors
- Consistently utilizing visual and auditory cues
- Behavior modification strategies
  - Response to Intervention and Instruction (RtII)
  - Proximity control
- Conflict resolution/de-escalation strategies

Establishing Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) and Assessments

- Assessing students' social and emotional needs
- Developing and adjusting strategies appropriate to students' needs
- Behavior as a desired outcome or strategy
- Student participation in behavioral goal-setting

Communicating and collaborating with families to support positive behaviors

- Investigating external resources
- School Social Workers
- Guidance Counselors
- Additional school or community-based supports
- Peer-mediation programs
At time of publishing, all of the website information was accurate. Due to the nature of the internet, some of the website information may have changed or become unavailable. Please see the references section of the corresponding online module for the most up-to-date information.
Accomplished teachers are attuned to the climate of the classroom, fully aware of interactions between students, and conscious of the level of student engagement with learning tasks. The maximization of time on task is achieved by an awareness of student needs and the implementation of appropriate rules and strategies. Students with known behavioral issues may be given appropriately differentiated tasks. Student behavior improves when the teacher actively encourages good behavior and rewards positive examples when they occur. Some incidents of negative student behavior are inevitable. A set of principles helps guide the teacher when responding to instances of misbehavior. Having evaluated the situation to determine if a misdemeanor actually occurred, interventions should be applied with minimal disruption to the flow of the lesson, preserve the dignity of students, and include consequences that match the level of misbehavior (Responding to Misbehavior, 2005). Effective teachers are well prepared with de-escalation techniques in order to avoid unnecessary conflict and maintain a dignified and professional relationship with students.

Utilizing appropriate time for tasks and feedback
Adept teachers recognize that some students lack the skills to sustain concentration on a single task for long periods of time. This is especially true for students who are identified as operating with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Brock (2002) recommends that academic assignments should be brief and students should be given regular encouragement by means of prompt feedback about the task they are working on. Long projects can be differentiated for the target student by breaking them up into smaller parts. Some teachers even use a timer to ensure that time spans are not excessive. Extra, short breaks may also help progress during long periods of class work.

Proactively involving physical activity and differentiated lessons with follow-up assessments
Some students are unable to function for long periods without some form of movement or physical activity. The teacher may assign tasks with the specific purpose of providing an opportunity to satisfy this type of student's need for movement. Examples may include asking the student to: run an errand to the school office, distribute a set of papers to the class, water classroom plants, or deliver a note to a colleague. Other possible physical activities include working a piece of clay, squeezing a stress ball, or even sharpening a set of pencils. A well-designed classroom layout allows for smooth circulation without the congestion and associated problems of students bumping into tables and one another. Students with ADHD may find sitting still especially difficult and should be allowed controlled opportunities for movement or be permitted to work standing up. Teachers need to recognize that students may be able to sit still some days and not others. Adaptability by incorporating opportunities for movement is needed for some students to complete longer learning tasks without excessive frustration or negative responses.

Implementing consistent use of rules, procedures, and routines in the classroom
An efficient teacher establishes clear parameters for behavior by involving students in the creation of classroom rules. The teacher strengthens those rules with a consistent and transparent application in the face of transgressions. Rules are more effective when few in number. Important classroom rules specify how students will treat one another, participate in learning, and ensure that the classroom is safe, orderly, and clean. Rules are better accepted by students when they are clearly explained, created with student input, and the behaviors they represent are continually modeled by the teacher.

Students should see that appropriate consequences follow when rules are broken. Consequences should generally be restricted to the identified offenders. Teachers are guaranteed to alienate many students if they make the beginner's mistake of punishing a whole class for the wrongdoing of one or two students. The exception may be when a class incentive scheme is used to reward the whole class for a sustained positive behavior, such as punctuality. Under those circumstances, when insufficient points are tallied for the class, students are likely to view the loss of incentive as a fair consequence. Students who are prone to misbehavior and rule breaking need extra teacher attention in order to guide them away from incidents that will surely lead to negative consequences.

Employing/modeling appropriate acceptable alternative behaviors
By setting clear expectations and modeling classroom routines, teachers assist students in making appropriate behavioral decisions. When an outside observer enters your classroom, it should be evident, “either from what the teacher says, or by inference from student actions, that expectations for student conduct have been established and that they are being implemented” (Danielson, 2011). However, the content of teachers’ verbal messages or reactions to incidents is only a part of the total message received by the class. Students take note of every nuance of the teacher’s tone and body language as they process their response. The calm teacher is able to model expectations for courteous and supportive behavior—especially during stressful situations. Students will quickly lose respect for a teacher who is inconsistent, moody, temperamental, or aggressive. In The First Days of School: How to be an Effective Teacher (2005), Wong reinforces that modeling is one of the most effective strategies teachers can use.
Metacognition, the practice of thinking about your thinking, is an instructive way for the teacher to model thinking out loud with students when faced with a classroom problem and looking for a solution. Teachers do occasionally lose their good temper or forget to follow through on promises. Apologies and an admission of error may turn the mistake into a learning moment that serves to maintain the respect of students. Students themselves model plenty of examples of good behavior that may be highlighted as examples for others to follow. Compliments earned for good application to a task, or cooperation with peers, serves to reinforce the goal of positive behavior.

**Consistently utilizing visual and auditory cues**

In the Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument, Danielson (2011), Charlotte Danielson describes how experienced teachers, “attuned to what's happening in the classroom,” are able to subtly move around and help student students (p. 41). Pressman (2012) offers a model of the teacher quality of “withitness.” Some teachers seem able to anticipate incidents before they happen and see situations with what seems to be x-ray vision. Classroom awareness, alertness, intuition, and confidence develop with experience. Students sense when a teacher is in control of the classroom and are therefore less likely to create diversions from their learning activity. The proficient teacher is able to employ effective body language, choose positions in proximity to likely trouble spots, and maintain control with a well-practiced look. Pressman describes the discipline of an effective teacher as being “almost invisible.” Responses such as continual nagging, repeated warnings, and excessive dialogue with students take up valuable time and are ineffective in creating a positive learning environment. Accomplished teachers hone their skills in noticing tiny movements and sounds and body positions of students in order to anticipate incidents and create an atmosphere of calm control.

**Behavior modification strategies**

**Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII)**

Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII) is a proactive initiative. It is applicable to all students and helps to avert failure by identifying and supporting students who are challenged by academic or behavior issues. The process of universal screening seeks to identify any students with learning disabilities and intervene with an appropriate level of support. Tiered Interventions are based upon the needs of each student. Pennsylvania Department of Education uses a three-tier model of assessment and support (Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII): An Introduction, 2010).

![Diagram](https://example.com/diagram.png)

All students are screened three to five times a year using benchmark assessments. The majority of students (about 80 - 90%) fit into Tier One and require no intervention to supplement the core instruction they receive. Some students (roughly 5 - 15%) in Tier Two are identified as needing intervention for academic or behavioral performance, and their progress is checked twice a month. A few students (approximately 1 - 5%) performing significantly below grade level are given intensive intervention, monitored weekly, and designated as belonging in Tier Three.

**Proximity control**

The relative position and orientation of the teacher and students in the classroom are crucial to maintaining classroom control. Students who
believe they are out of the line of sight may be tempted to find alternative activities for amusement or take the opportunity to misbehave in the reasonable belief that the chance of being caught is small. A savvy teacher will move around the room, keeping their eyes to the class rather than facing a nearby wall, and frequently change their field of view. When in deep discussion with one student, the teacher still needs to maintain oversight by regularly glancing up to check the room. Misbehavior is less likely to occur when the teacher creates an impression of constant surveillance around the room. Classroom management strategies can help to reduce the likelihood of students becoming emboldened enough to misbehave. The layout of desks or tables can help by allowing the teacher easy access between students. A controlled seating plan helps place targeted students closer to the teacher’s home position and not in a back corner.

**Conflict resolution/de-escalation strategies**

Teachers are better able to deal with conflict and seek constructive outcomes when the problem is approached using an established protocol. Shared Solutions (2007) describes a number of statements to define some features of effective conflict resolution.

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When conflicts occur between students it may be possible for the teacher to facilitate an agreeable resolution. Skillful teachers learn facilitation skills in order to increase the likelihood of acceptable outcomes. The role of a facilitator is to help the participants, not to impose a solution. The teacher may be able to help both (or several) parties verbalize the issue, identify common ground, and find a resolution. Shared Solutions (2007) describes a number of features of effective facilitation.

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I-statements, using three or four connected phrases, may be used effectively by both children and adults when impacted by negative behavior from peers. They allow students to assert a position and explain their concerns in order to begin a discussion aimed at conflict resolution. The structure of the I-statements formula, laden with an emotional element, is shown below.
O’Reilly & March (2004) describe a seven-stage observed process (as cited in the work of Colvin, 2004), that details the escalation and de-escalation of incidents from students with behavior problems. Understanding the cycle of behavior escalation may enable a teacher to recognize the signs leading to an outburst and take steps to calm the situation. The seven stages are shown in the diagram below.

Students remain in the calm, first stage until a trigger alters their behavior. Triggers may be based in the school or can be home-based. School-based triggers can include conflicts with classmates and teachers, academic challenges, or routine change. Triggers can arise outside of school, such as family conflicts, sleep deprivation, inappropriate nutrition, prescribed medications, or prohibited drugs. The teacher may be able to identify some triggers, especially when they are rooted in academic tasks, and try to avert the negative response. Signs of agitation are obvious when a teacher is familiar with the behavior and habits of the student. Indicators may include lack of eye contact, hand movements, and preoccupation. Reassurance, encouragement, and perhaps a change of activity may help the student and defuse the escalation. The acceleration stage marks the beginning of conflict. The student may provoke others in the classroom, become defiant, use offensive words and damage books and equipment. The acceleration stage is the very last point at which the teacher can make a difference to the level of severity of the incident. Skillful teachers will keep calm, speak with a soft and unemotional voice, use the student’s name, and attempt to address the specifics of the behavior rather than the student as a personality. The peak phase of a serious incident may include threats of/or actual violence to persons and damage to property. The teacher needs to focus only on student and personal safety, seek help from colleagues, and only intervene where physical safety is threatened. De-escalation will follow the peak stage when the student's anger is spent. At this point the student needs personal space to complete the return to the calm stage. It may be that the student needs to be collected by parents or spend time out of the classroom. When the student remains in class, undemanding tasks that occupy the attention of the student are beneficial to help return things to normal.
Establishing behavior intervention plans (BIPs) and assessments

As part of their individual educational plan (IEP), students with serious behavior problems may require a behavior intervention plan (BIP). The purpose of a BIP is to define behaviors in need of change and indicate any interventions designed to effect change. A BIP is based upon the premises that behavior is predictable and can be altered. The BIP should include the components listed below.

According to Mauro (n.d), a BIP makes use of information gathered by observations in order to develop a clear plan to support the student in managing behavior problems. The BIP may recommend changes to the classroom environment, strategies to reward good and redirect negative behavior, and the provision of appropriate support.

Assessing students’ social and emotional needs

The Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA describes a number of the social and emotional needs of all students in order to succeed in school and function as adults (Rethinking How Schools Address Student Misbehavior, 2008).

These skills include:
- recognition and management of emotions,
- development of feelings of care and concern for others,
- establishment of positive relationships with peers,
- responsible decision-making, and
- constructive and ethical handling of challenging situations.

Students need to know how to “calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices.” Many school curricula include instructional outcomes that address personal and social functioning. Teachers are able to model the development of interpersonal skills by such strategies as the promotion of cooperative learning and sharing, minimization of counterproductive elements of peer competition, and by the creation of learning opportunities from interpersonal conflicts (Rethinking How Schools Address Student Misbehavior, 2008).

Developing and adjusting strategies appropriate to students’ needs

Experienced teachers recognize the differentiated needs of students and address them with appropriate classroom strategies. Creating Effective Classroom Management Strategies for Special Education Students (2012) describes a range of suggestions to support students by reducing frustration and helping to keep them feeling positive. Suggestions include:
- Scaffold lessons into smaller sections with frequent success points built in.
- Use peer pair sharing to promote inclusion of all students.
- Include assessment rubrics for positive contributions in order to include behavioral alongside of academic goals.
Increase the chances of success by adjusting assignment expectations for some students.

Provide students with applicable learning strategies such as graphic organizers.

Conflicts may be avoided when teachers and students work together and each recognize that certain learning situations lead to the student giving up or being confrontational. Modified assignments and the avoidance of known triggers may be sufficient support for the student to function well in the classroom and make optimal academic progress.

**Behavior as a desired outcome or strategy**

Vega (2012) presents five key competencies that may be used as the basis to phrase learning outcomes from the domain of social and emotional learning.

Research findings reported by Vega (2012) indicate that measured improvements in academic performance are observed in students who are explicitly and sequentially taught the five competencies listed above. Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs “also reduced aggression and emotional distress among students, increased helping behaviors in school, and improved positive attitudes toward self and others.”

**Student participation in behavioral goal-setting**

Behavior contracts are written agreements between teachers and students. Both parties agree upon goals for improvement. The contract specifies expected behaviors, positive and negative consequences and a time frame, and includes review dates. The wording should emphasise the agreed descriptors for positive behavior. The teacher, student, and any other participants (such as support staff), sign the document. Behavior contracts may be used to address classroom-based problems such as misbehavior or lack of engagement. Additionally, they may also refer to problems that extend outside of school such as substance abuse or poor school attendance.

**Communicating and collaborating with families to support positive behaviors**

Causes of student misbehavior may be rooted in both family and school life. Teachers are expected to report any serious instances of student misbehavior to the family that significantly affect learning or are likely to lead to serious sanctions. Families should expect to be informed about serious issues as they happen, and not be unpleasantly surprised by a report that details a downward behavior spiral over a period of weeks or months. Messages from teachers to families should be devoid of the teacher's feelings, state the facts of what, where, and when for the incident, and advise families of possible consequences. Teachers should not expect families to directly fix misbehaviors that occur in the classroom. Students are less likely to engage in misbehavior and more likely to experience success when families are involved and in agreement with the school. Positive messages are also important. The student and family gain great encouragement when a teacher makes the effort to report on an improving trend or an example of exceptionally good behavior.
Investigating external resources

A range of services provided by the school or district may be available to support students. The student’s individual educational plan (IEP) may specify the need for services such as counseling with the school psychologist, speech/language services, transportation, occupational or physical therapy, or social work services in order to meet his/her goals and objectives.

School Social Workers
School social workers bridge the gap between home and school and assist school personnel in meeting students’ needs. Tier two RTI interventions may be managed by a school social worker. Support is provided to help students, families, and teachers address a number of emotional, physical, and economic problems. School social workers may deal with issues such as truancy, social withdrawal, aggressive behavior, substance abuse, and sexuality issues with older students.

The National Association of Social Workers defines the roles of school social workers to include data gathering from the student, family, and school personnel, in order to provide an assessment of student needs. Subsequently, school social workers use the assessment results to design and implement interventions (NASW Standards for School Social Work Services, 2012).

Guidance Counselors
The American School Counselor Association describes the services that school counselors provide to “students, parents, school staff and the community” (Delivery System, 2008). Responsive counseling services, including crisis response, meet the immediate needs of students in small group settings or individually. Teachers should remember that the roles of a counselor are to advocate for and support students. Counselors are not disciplinarians. School counselors may recommend the referral of a case to outside agencies, such as community organizations or medical professionals and are actively committed to eliminating barriers that limit the success of students. Through diligent observation teachers will be able to judge when a situation demands additional professional skills or when a student may benefit from the expertise and experience of the school guidance counselor.

Additional school or community-based supports
School counselors are trained to recognize the limits of their capabilities when counseling and supporting a student with significant social, emotional, or family-based problems. The school counselor will be aware of and cultivate contacts with community support services such as school psychologists or social workers and refer the student for more specialized support when appropriate. The National Association of School Psychologists details some of the counseling and mentoring services provided for students and families by certified school psychologists (What is a School Psychologist?, n.d.).
Peer mediation programs
According to Baginsky (2004), "mediation is a process whereby people involved in a dispute enter voluntarily into an arrangement to resolve the problem collaboratively." A neutral mediator establishes an agreement for rules of conduct, helps the participants identify their dispute, and describe what their preferred outcome would be. The role of the mediator is not to give advice and certainly not to impose a solution. The participants are themselves responsible for making a written agreement. Some of the applications of peer mediation are shown below.

Malek (n.d.) describes the peer mediation used in many primary and secondary schools as a process “in which students act as mediators to help other students resolve disputes.” Peer mediation brings added benefits to students and schools. Reduced problems of negative behavior and fewer suspensions are noted in schools that utilize peer mediation. Students gain from learning a transferable skill that will stay with them for a lifetime. Many schools operate with a curriculum-based approach to peer mediation training. A whole class, grade level, or school community may be taught the requisite skills.
Conclusion

Misbehavior from students is a reality virtually all teachers face. How often do novice teachers find a class difficult to handle, only to see a seasoned colleague manage the same class with ease and good humor? The good news is that novice teachers are able to develop the enhanced professional skills and strategies needed to better manage the student behavior. Experienced colleagues are a great source of advice and professional learning communities are a good way to share strategies for managing student behavior. The teacher’s qualities of compassion, caring, professional commitment, subject knowledge, and many others can shine when classroom behavior is managed satisfactorily. Proficient teachers are able to create an organized and optimistic classroom climate. Only then will students respect the teacher’s positive qualities and make full use of the learning opportunities in the classroom.
References


