

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

The Practical Teacher



This Week's Topic:

School-Wide Strategies for Managing - HYPERACTIVITY

Hyperactive students tend to have a very high energy level, act impulsively and can be behaviorally distracting. They may fidget, play with objects, tap pencils so loudly against their desk that kids from across the room look over at them, or blurt out answers to teacher questions before the instructor is even finished asking them. When working with students who are hyperactive or impulsive, teachers should keep in mind that these students are very often completely unaware that others view their behavior as distracting or annoying.

Teachers working with such children can greatly increase their own effectiveness by clearly communicating behavioral expectations to students, by encouraging and rewarding students who behave appropriately, and by being consistent and fair when responding to problem student behaviors. Here are teacher ideas for managing impulsive or hyperactive students who display problem motor or verbal behaviors:

- **Adopt a 'Silent Signal'** (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). You can redirect overactive students in a low-key manner by using a silent signal. Meet privately with the student and identify for the student those motor or verbal behaviors that appear to be most distracting. With the student's help, select a silent signal that you can use to alert the student that his or her behavior has crossed the threshold and now is distracting others. Role-play several scenarios with the student in which you use the silent signal and the student then controls the problem behavior. When you are able to successfully use the 'silent signal' during instruction, be sure to praise the student privately for responding appropriately and promptly to your signal.
- **Allow Discretionary Motor Breaks** (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). When given brief 'movement' breaks, highly active students often show improvements in their behaviors. Permit the student to leave his or her seat and quietly walk around the classroom whenever the student feels particularly fidgety. Or, if you judge that motor breaks within the classroom would be too distracting, consider giving the student a discretionary pass that allows him or her to leave the classroom briefly to get a drink of water or walk up and down the hall.
- **Encourage Acceptable Outlets for Motor Behavior** (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). If the student distracts other students by playing with objects, substitute an alternative motor behavior that will not distract others. Give the student a soft 'stress ball' and encourage the student to squeeze it whenever he or she feels the need for motor movement. Or if the setting is appropriate, allow the student to chew gum as a replacement motor behavior.
- **Have the Student Monitor Motor Behaviors and Call-Outs** (DuPaul & Stoner, 2002). Students can often change problem behaviors when they pay attention to those behaviors. Have the student monitor his or her motor behaviors or call-outs. First, choose a class period or part of the day when you want the student to monitor distracting behaviors. Next, meet privately with the student to discuss which of that student's behaviors are distracting. Then, together with the student, design a simple distractible behavior-rating form with no more than 3 items (For a student who calls out frequently, for example, a useful rating item might be "How well did I observe the rule today of raising my hand and being called on before giving an answer? Poor – Fair – Good".) Have the student rate his or her behaviors at the end of each class period. Make an effort to praise the student (a) for being accurate in rating behaviors, and (b) for any improvements that you see in the student's behaviors over time.
- **Ignore Low-Level Motor Behaviors** (Sprick, Borgmeier & Nolet, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Selective ignoring can be an effective teacher response to minor fidgeting or other motor behaviors. If the student's 'fidgety' behaviors are relatively minor and do not seriously derail classroom instruction, the teacher should simply not pay attention to them.

- **Remove Unnecessary Items From the Student's Work Area** (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Students who tend to distract themselves and others by playing with objects behave better when their work area is uncluttered. Take away (or direct the student to put away) any items that the student does not need for the work assignment but might be tempted to play with (e.g., extra pens, paper clips).
- **Schedule Group 'Stretch Breaks'** (Brock, 1998). You can increase the focus of your entire class and appropriately channel the motor behaviors of fidgety students by scheduling brief 'stretch breaks.' At their simplest, stretch breaks consist of having students stand next to their desks, stretch their arms, take a deep breath, and exhale slowly before resuming their seats. Or you can be creative, having students take part in different movements during each break (e.g., "OK class. It's time for a stretch break. Stand by your desk, arms over your head. Then take 3 steps back and 3 steps forward..."). NOTE: When using stretch breaks, be sure that you select movements that all of your students are physically able to accomplish without difficulty.
- **Seat the Student Next to Distraction-Resistant Peers** (Kerr & Nelson, 1998). One useful strategy for managing low-level motor behaviors is to seat the student next to peers who can generally ignore those behaviors. Rearrange seating in the classroom so that the student is sitting near peers who are good behavior models and are not readily distracted by that student's minor fidgety movements or playing with objects.
- **Select a 'Supportive Peer'** (DuPaul & Stoner, 2002). Handpick a classmate who has a good relationship with the student but is not easily drawn off-task and appoint that student as a 'helper peer'. Meet privately with the student and the helper peer. Tell the peer that whenever he or she notices that the student's verbal or motor behavior has risen to the level of distracting others, the peer should give the student a brief, quiet, non-judgmental signal (e.g., a light tap on the shoulder) to control the behavior. Role-play several scenarios so that the peer knows when he or she can ignore the student's low-level motor behaviors and when the peer should use a signal to alert the student to more distracting behaviors.
- **Structure Instructional Activities to Allow Interaction and Movement** (DuPaul & Stoner, 2002; Sprick, Borgmeier & Nolet, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Students with high energy levels may be more likely to engage in distracting behavior when they are forced to sit through long periods of lecture or independent seatwork. Instead, offer students frequent opportunities for more movement by designing instruction to actively engage them as learners (e.g., cooperative learning). An additional advantage of less formal, more spontaneous learning activities is that when the overactive child does happen to display motor behaviors in this relaxed setting, those behaviors are less likely to distract peers.

- **Use 'Response Cost'** (DuPaul & Stoner, 2002; Martens & Meller, 1990). A strategy to reduce distracting verbal or motor behaviors is to use 'response cost': first awarding points or tokens and then deducting those points or tokens whenever the behavior distracts other students. Here is a simple version that you can use in your classroom: Award the student a certain number of 'behavior points' (e.g., 5) at the start of each class period and write a series of tally marks on the blackboard that corresponds to this number. Privately inform the student that each time that he or she engages in verbal or motor behaviors that obviously distract other students (e.g., cause them to comment on the behavior), you will silently go to the board and erase one point from the student's total. At the end of each class period, the student is allowed to keep any 'behavior points' that remain. Let the student know that he or she can collect points across multiple days and eventually redeem a certain number of collected 'behavior points' for prizes or privileges (e.g., extra free time).
- **Use Brief Reminders About Appropriate Behavior and Conduct** (DuPaul & Stoner, 2002; Sprick, Borgmeier & Nolet, 2002). Provide students with brief reminders of expected behaviors at the 'point of performance', when they will most benefit from it. Consider using structured prompts such as the following for students who tend to blurt out answers: "When I ask this question, I will give the class 10 seconds to think of your best answer. Then I will call on one student." Or you can remind students who have difficulty moving through hallways as part of a group, "Remember to keep hands to self and to walk quietly on the right as we walk to art class."

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