

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER



This Week's Topic:

Strategies for Managing Defiance and Non-Compliance

Students who are defiant or non-compliant can be among the most challenging to teach. They can frequently interrupt instruction, often do poorly academically, and may show little motivation to learn. There are no magic strategies for managing the behaviors of defiant students. However, research shows that certain techniques tend to work best with these children and youth:

(1) Give the student positive teacher recognition. Even actions as simple as greeting the student daily at the classroom door or stopping by the student's desk to ask 'How are you doing?' can over time turn strained relationships into positive ones.

- (2) Monitor the classroom frequently and intervene proactively to redirect off-task students before their mild misbehaviors escalate into more serious problems.
- (3) Avoid saying or doing things that are likely to anger or set off a student. Speak calmly and respectfully, for example, rather than raising your voice or using sarcasm.
- (4) When you must intervene with a misbehaving student, convey the message to the student that you will not tolerate the problem behavior—but that you continue to value and accept the student.
- (5) Remember that the ultimate goal of any disciplinary measure is to teach the student more positive ways of behaving. Punishment generally does not improve student behaviors over the long term and can have significant and lasting negative effects on school performance and motivation.
- (6) Develop a classroom ‘crisis response plan’ to be implemented in the event that one or more students display aggressive behaviors that threaten their own safety or the safety of others. Be sure that your administrator approves this classroom crisis plan and that everyone who has a part in the plan knows his or her role.

One final thought: While you can never predict what behaviors your students might bring into your classroom, you will usually achieve the best outcomes by remaining calm, following pre-planned intervention strategies for misbehavior, and acting with consistency and fairness when intervening with or disciplining students.

Here are other ideas for managing defiant or non-compliant students:

- **Allow the Student a 'Cool-Down' Break** (*Long, Morse, & Newman, 1980*). Select a corner of the room (or area outside the classroom with adult supervision) where the target student can take a brief 'respite break' whenever he or she feels angry or upset. Be sure to make cool-down breaks available to all students in the classroom, to avoid singling out only those children with anger-control issues. Whenever a student becomes upset and defiant, offer to talk the situation over with that student once he or she has calmed down and then direct the student to the cool-down corner. (E.g., "Thomas, I want to talk with you about what is upsetting you, but first you need to calm down. Take five minutes in the cool-down corner and then come over to my desk so we can talk.")
- **Ask Open-Ended Questions** (*Lanceley, 2001*). If a teacher who is faced with a confrontational student does not know what triggered that student's defiant response, the instructor can ask neutral, open-ended questions to collect more information before responding. You can pose 'who', 'what', 'where', 'when', and 'how' questions to more fully understand the problem situation and identify possible solutions. Some sample questions are "What do you think made you angry when you were talking with Billy?" and "Where were you when you realized that you had misplaced your science book?" One caution: Avoid asking 'why' questions (e.g., "Why did you get into that fight with Jerry?") because they can imply that you are blaming the student.

- **Assign a Reflective ‘Processing’ Essay After Misbehavior** (Boynton & Boynton, 2005; Mayer & Ybarra, 2004; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). The student who gets into a conflict must write and submit to the teacher a brief ‘process’ plan outlining how they will improve their behavior. At minimum, the plan would state: (1) the role the student played in the conflict, (2) the part that other participants may have taken in the incident, (3) the student’s suggestions for finding the best resolution to the problem, and (4) how the student can act in the future to prevent the conflict from recurring. **NOTE:** Some teachers use a pre-printed structured questionnaire containing these 4 items for the student to complete.
- **Do Not Get Entangled in Arguments** (Walker & Walker, 1991). The careful teacher avoids being dragged into arguments or unnecessary discussion when disciplining students. When you must deliver a command to, confront, or discipline a student who is defiant or confrontational, be careful not to get ‘hooked’ into a discussion or argument with that student. If you find yourself being drawn into an exchange with the student (e.g., raising your voice, reprimanding the student), immediately use strategies to disengage yourself (e.g., by moving away from the student, repeating your request in a business-like tone of voice, imposing a pre-determined consequence for noncompliance).
- **Emphasize the Positive in Teacher Requests** (Braithwaite, 2001). When an instructor’s request has a positive ‘spin’, that teacher is less likely to trigger a power struggle and more likely to gain student compliance. Whenever possible, avoid using negative phrasing (e.g., “If you don’t return to your seat, I can’t help you with your assignment”). Instead, restate requests in positive terms (e.g., “I will be over to help you on the assignment just as soon as you return to your seat”).
- **Expand the Range of Classroom Behavior Interventions** (Sprick, Borgmeier, & Nolet, 2002). The teacher who has developed an array of in-class consequences for minor misbehaviors can prevent students from being sent to the principal’s office or to in-school detention. First, list those common misbehaviors that you believe should typically be handled in the classroom (e.g. being late to class, talking out). When finished, categorize your list of misbehaviors into 3 groups: ‘Level 1’ (mild) misbehaviors, ‘Level 2’ (medium) misbehaviors, and ‘Level 3’ (more serious) misbehaviors. Then, list next to each level of problem behaviors a range of in-class consequences that you feel appropriately match those types of misbehavior. For example, you may decide that a ‘soft’ reprimand would be a choice to address Level 1 misbehaviors, while a phone call to the parent would be a choice for Level 3 misbehaviors. **NOTE:** In-class consequences are intended for minor misbehaviors. You should notify an administrator whenever students display behaviors that seriously disrupt learning or pose a risk to the safety of that student or to others.
- **Give Praise That is Specific and Does Not Embarrass the Student** (Sprick, Borgmeier, & Nolet, 2002). Defiant students can respond well to adult praise but only when it is sincere and specific, and is not embarrassing. Ideally, the teacher should deliver praise as soon as possible after the positive behavior. Praise should be specific and descriptive—because vague, general praise can sound fake and does not give the student any useful information about how their behavior meets or exceeds the teacher’s expectations. For older students who tend to dislike being praised in a highly public manner, the teacher can use a more indirect or low-key approach (e.g., writing a note of praise on the student’s graded assignment, praising the student in a private conversation, calling the student’s parent to praise the student).

- **Give Problem Students Frequent Positive Attention** (*Sprick, Borgmeier, & Nolet, 2002*). Teachers should make an effort to give positive attention or praise to problem students at least three times more frequently than they reprimand them. The teacher gives the student the attention or praise during moments when that student is acting appropriately--and keeps track of how frequently they give positive attention and reprimands to the student. This heavy dosing of positive attention and praise can greatly improve the teacher's relationship with problem students.
- **Have the Student Participate in Creating a Behavior Plan** (*Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995*). Students can feel a greater sense of ownership when they are invited to contribute to their behavior management plan. Students also tend to know better than anyone else what triggers will set off their problem behaviors and what strategies they find most effective in calming themselves and avoiding conflicts or other behavioral problems.
- **Increase 'Reinforcement' Quality of the Classroom** (*Dunlap & Kern, 1996; Mayer & Ybarra, 2004*). If a student appears to be defiant or non-compliant in an effort to escape the classroom, the logical solution is to make the classroom environment and activities more attractive and reinforcing for that student. Unfortunately, the student who fails repeatedly at academics can quickly come to view school as punishment. Some ideas to increase motivation to remain in the classroom are to structure lessons or assignments around topics of high interest to the target student, to increase opportunities for cooperative learning (which many students find reinforcing), and to adjust the target student's instruction so that he or she experiences a high rate of success on classwork and homework.
- **Keep Responses Calm, Brief, and Businesslike** (*Mayer, 2000; Sprick, Borgmeier, & Nolet, 2002*). Because teacher sarcasm or lengthy negative reprimands can trigger defiant student behavior, instructors should respond to the student in a 'neutral', business-like, calm voice. Also, keep responses brief when addressing the non-compliant student. Short teacher responses give the defiant student less control over the interaction and can also prevent instructors from inadvertently 'rewarding' misbehaving students with lots of negative adult attention.
- **Listen Actively** (*Lanceley, 1999; Long, Morse, & Newman, 1980*). The teacher demonstrates a sincere desire to understand a student's concerns when he or she actively listens to and then summarizes those concerns. Many students lack effective negotiation skills in dealing with adults. As a result, these students may become angry and defensive when they try to express a complaint to the teacher-even when that complaint is well founded. The instructor can show that he or she wants to understand the student's concern by summing up the crucial points of that concern (paraphrasing) in his or her own words. Examples of paraphrase comments include 'Let me be sure that I understand you correctly...', 'Are you telling me that...?', 'It sounds to me like these are your concerns:...' When teachers engage in 'active listening' by using paraphrasing, they demonstrate a respect for the student's point of view and can also improve their own understanding of the student's problem.
- **Offer the Student a Face-Saving Out** (*Thompson & Jenkins, 1993*). Students sometimes blunder into potential confrontations with their teachers; when this happens, the teacher helps the student to avoid a full-blown conflict in a manner that allows the student to save face. Try this face-saving de-escalation tactic: Ask the defiant student, "Is there anything that we can work out together so that you can stay in the classroom and be successful?" Such a statement treats the student with dignity, models negotiation as a positive means for resolving conflict, and demonstrates that the instructor wants to keep

the student in the classroom. It also provides the student with a final chance to resolve the conflict with the teacher and avoid other, more serious disciplinary consequences. Be prepared for the possibility that the student will initially give a sarcastic or unrealistic response (e.g., "Yeah, you can leave me alone and stop trying to get me to do classwork!"). Ignore such attempts to hook you into a power struggle and simply ask again whether there is any reasonable way to engage the student's cooperation. When asked a second time, students will often come up with workable ideas for resolving the problem. If the student continues to be non-compliant, however, simply impose the appropriate consequences for that misbehavior.

- **Proactively Interrupt the Student's Anger Early in the Escalation Cycle** (Long, Morse, & Newman, 1980; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). The teacher may be able to 'interrupt' a student's escalating behaviors by redirecting that student's attention or temporarily removing the student from the setting. If the student is showing only low-level defiant or non-compliant behavior, you might try engaging the student in a high-interest activity such as playing an educational computer game or acting as a classroom helper. Or you may want to briefly remove the student from the room ('antiseptic bounce') to prevent the student's behavior from escalating into a full-fledged confrontation. For example, you might send the student to the main office on an errand, with the expectation that-by the time the child returns to the classroom-he or she will have calmed down.
- **Project Calmness When Approaching an Escalating Student** (Long, Morse, & Newman, 1980; Mayer, 2000; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). A teacher's chances of defusing a potential confrontation with an angry or defiant student increase greatly if the instructor carefully controls his or her behavior when first approaching the student. Here are important tips: Move toward the student at a slow, deliberate pace, and respect the student's private space by maintaining a reasonable distance. If possible, speak privately to the student, using a calm and respectful voice. Avoid body language that might provoke the student, such as staring, hands on hips, or finger pointing. Keep your comments brief. If the student's negative behaviors escalate despite your best efforts, move away from the student and seek additional adult assistance or initiate a crisis-response plan.
- **Relax Before Responding** (Braithwaite, 2001). Educators can maintain self-control during a tense classroom situation by using a brief, simple stress-reduction technique before responding to a student's provocative remark or behavior. When provoked, for example, take a deeper-than-normal breath and release it slowly, or mentally count to 10. As an added benefit, this strategy of conscious relaxation allows the educator an additional moment to think through an appropriate response--rather than simply reacting to the student's behavior.
- **Reward Alternative (Positive) Behaviors** (Mayer & Ybarra, 2004; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). The instructor can shape positive behaviors by selectively calling on the student or providing other positive attention or incentives only when the student is showing appropriate social and academic behaviors. The teacher withholds positive attention or incentives when the student misbehaves or does not engage in academics.
- **State Teacher Directives as Two-Part Choice Statements** (Walker, 1997). When a student's confrontational behavior seems driven by a need for control, the teacher can structure verbal requests to both acknowledge the student's freedom to choose whether to comply and present the logical consequences for non-compliance (e.g., poor grades, office disciplinary referral, etc.). Frame requests to uncooperative students as a

two-part statement. First, present the negative, or non-compliant, choice and its consequences (e.g., if a seatwork assignment is not completed in class, the student must stay after school). Then state the positive behavioral choice that you would like the student to select (e.g., the student can complete the seatwork assignment within the allotted work time and not stay after school). Here is a sample 2-part choice statement, 'John, you can stay after school to finish the class assignment or you can finish the assignment now and not have to stay after class. It is your choice.'

- **Use a 'Buddy Teacher' for Brief Student Breaks** (*Boynton & Boynton, 2005*). Sending a mildly non-compliant student on a short visit to a neighboring classroom can give both the teacher and student a needed break. Arrange with an instructor in a nearby room for either of you to send a student to the other's room whenever you need a short respite from the student. Set aside a seating area in each classroom for student visitors. NOTE: These timeouts should be used only sparingly and should NOT be used if the student appears to find the breaks rewarding or to seek them as a way to avoid work.
- **Use Non-Verbal and Para-Verbal Behaviors to Defuse Potential Confrontations** (*Braithwaite, 2001; Long, Morse, & Newman, 1980; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995*). When interacting with defiant or confrontational students, teachers can use non-verbal and para-verbal techniques such as non-threatening body language, soft tone of voice, or strategic pauses during speech, to reduce tensions. For example, if a student is visibly agitated, you may decide to sit down next to the student at eye level (a less threatening posture) rather than standing over that student. Or you might insert a very brief 'wait time' before each response to the student, as these micro-pauses tend to signal calmness, slow a conversation down and help to prevent it from escalating into an argument.
- **Use 'Soft' Reprimands** (*Sprick, Borgmeier, & Nolet, 2002*). The teacher gives a brief, gentle signal to direct back to task any students who is just beginning to show signs of misbehavior or non-compliance. These 'soft' reprimands can be verbal (a quiet word to the student) or non-verbal (a significant look). If a soft reprimand is not sufficient to curb the student's behaviors, the teacher may pull the student aside for a private problem-solving conversation or implement appropriate disciplinary consequences.
- **Validate the Student's Emotion by Acknowledging It** (*Lanceley, 1999*). When the teacher observes that a student seems angry or upset, the instructor labels the emotion that seems to be driving that student's behavior. 'Emotion labeling' can be a helpful tactic in deescalating classroom confrontations because it prompts the student to acknowledge his or her current feeling-state directly rather than continuing to communicate it indirectly through acting-out behavior. A teacher, for example, who observes a student slamming her books down on her desk and muttering to herself after returning from gym class might say to the student, "You seem angry. Could you tell me what is wrong?" Once a powerful emotion such as anger is labeled, the teacher and student can then talk about it, figure out what may have triggered it, and jointly find solutions that will mitigate it. Emotion labeling should generally be done in a tentative manner ("John, you sound nervous...", "Alice, you appear frustrated..."), since one can never know with complete certainty what feelings another person is experiencing.

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