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# Introduction

It is often said that teaching today is more difficult than ever before. Because of our unique position in the educational community, we know that statement is true. We also know how hard you are working and how frustrated you frequently feel. We empathise with your struggles.

We also know that tomorrow can be a better day for you and your students. Skill and determination can make it happen.

*Succeeding With Difficult Students* began as a conversation that took place with one of our consultants following a behaviour management workshop. We know that behaviour management is effective in the classroom, and realise that it's the difficult students who take up the majority of a teacher's time. We decided that it was time to direct our efforts towards developing specialised techniques for teaching these students who challenge us each day.

We began to think about how fulfilling it would be to reach out to these students—to “build bridges instead of walls”. How satisfying it would feel to say to a student after a particularly trying day, “I feel bad about the difficult day we had, and I could see that it wasn't easy for you, either. I want you to be successful in class, and I know things can be better. Tomorrow we're going to start over fresh. We'll work to make things better. How does that sound?”

Building relationships with the very children we tend to keep at a distance is the heart of the *Succeeding With Difficult Students* program.

Lee and I have shared a very fulfilling year working on this project, and we're excited about sharing our ideas and techniques with you. It is our hope that by learning these new skills you will feel better prepared to face your tomorrows in the classroom.

The children you teach are the future of this country. As an educator, you provide for them the most influential relationship they may have outside of their family. It is an honour for us to work side by side with you as we strive to make a difference in education.

—Marlene Canter

## Difficult Students: You Know Who They Are

*It's Lisa who holds court in your classroom with tough, rude remarks, incessant talking, and a hostile attitude that clearly communicates she couldn't care less about what you say or do or think.*

*It's Robert, who isn't able to let five minutes pass without jumping out of his seat, making noise, bothering other students, or calling attention to himself in one way or another.*

*And it's Geoff, who won't even try to do his work no matter what you say or do.*

Difficult students are the students who are continually disruptive, persistently defiant, demanding of attention, or unmotivated. They are the students who defy your authority and cause you stress, frustration, and anger. Many of these students have severe emotional or behavioural problems. They may have been physically or psychologically abused, or born substance-addicted to alcohol, cocaine, or other drugs. Many of them come from home environments where parents have minimal, if any, influence or control over their behaviour.

Difficult students are *not* the students in your class who act up occasionally. They're not the ones who once in a while may cause you to lose your temper. Difficult students are those who engage in disruptive, off-task behaviour with great intensity and frequency.

As one embattled teaching veteran commented, "I know exactly who my difficult students are. They're the ones who on the days they are absent, I'm happy."

These kids don't misbehave once a day.

They misbehave *several* times a day.

In short, they are the students with whom your regular classroom management efforts do not work.

*"I've tried everything I know to help Eric behave in class and do his work, but he just doesn't respond like other kids. Believe me, I try to catch him being good. I praise him when I see him doing anything at all that's the least bit praiseworthy, but he couldn't care less. I might as well be talking to a wall."*

What kinds of problems do difficult students present in the classroom? Put any group of teachers together to brainstorm that question, and they will come up with a list of behavioural descriptions that look like this:

- Intense responses
- Talk back; rude
- Constantly off task
- Physically abusive to teacher
- Provoke peers
- Insult teacher's appearance
- Violent behaviour with peers
- Chronically absent
- Highly emotional
- Defiant attitude
- One misbehaviour after another
- Verbally abusive to teacher
- Nonstop talking
- Don't care
- Chronically late
- "Clingy" student

Couple any one of these behaviours with a high degree of frequency, and it becomes clear why difficult students are so significant to you. After all, how many students does it take to stop an entire class from functioning? Just one.

The disruptive behaviour of just one student can stop you from teaching and can stop the other students in your classroom from learning.

Simply put, this means that just one student can keep you from doing your job.

Just one student has the potential power to adversely affect your confidence in your ability as a teacher. *Attempting* to deal with this student day after day can cause your self-esteem to suffer and leave you feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and burnt out.

These students literally can make or break your school year. It doesn't matter if the student is a 25-kg year 4 student or a 180-cm Year 10 student. The outcome is the same. Difficult students keep you from getting your professional needs met.

Teachers are frustrated because of the increasing number of disruptions difficult students cause during class, and because these students seem to consistently defy all their best-intentioned efforts to reach them.

As the opening scenario illustrates, a teacher often reacts to difficult students based on past experience, and the student is quickly labelled. Once a student is labelled (hyperactive, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or just plain impossible), what are his or her chances of ever being seen as a unique individual with potential for achievement in school?

Even more critical, once a student is so labelled, it's all too easy to drop responsibility—to feel that the student has too many problems—that there's "nothing I can do".

When nothing works with them, difficult students tend to make you forget the confidence you once had in your ability to impact each and every student.

The message of this book is that it doesn't have to be this way.