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Who are difficult students?

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 awhile may cause you to lose your temper. Difficult students are those who engage in disruptive, off-task behaviour with great intensity and frequency.

These are the students with whom your regular classroom management efforts do not work.

There is no question that difficult students present a greater challenge today than ever before. Teachers are frustrated because of the disruptions these students cause to the rest of the class, and also because they seem to defy all their best-intentioned efforts to reach them. With difficult students, a teacher often simply reacts to genuine feelings of frustration based on past experiences, and the student is quickly labelled.

Once a student is labelled (hyperactive, Attention Deficit Disorder, or just plain impossible), what are his or her chances of ever being seen as a unique individual with potential for succeeding at school? Once a student is 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 seems to work with them, difficult students tend to make you forget the confidence you once had in your ability to have a positive impact on each and every student.

You Can Turn This Situation Around

You can help the difficult students in your own classroom have a positive school experience this year, raise their self-esteem and increase their self-confidence.

It starts with taking a look at your own perceptions.

Most students arrive in your classroom with a basic foundation of trust in school, and teachers in particular. Their parents have supported their efforts and have motivated them to behave and succeed in school. These students have had positive experiences with teachers and have received self-esteem-building reinforcement and encouragement from both home and school.

Based on their past successful experiences, these students—the majority of your class—are able to trust you, and trust that what you ask of them is in their best interest. Because they are able to trust, they are able to accept your guidance.

The difficult student, on the other hand, comes to the classroom with a different perception based upon very different experiences. Many come from home environments where the parents themselves had negative school experiences, and where respect for the teacher and school has not been communicated. Other students come from homes where the adults in their lives have been unreliable role models—unresponsive, abusive or simply overwhelmed and unable to meet their children's needs for motivation and support.

Whatever the origin, these students enter school with a deficit of trust in schools, and in the adults who are there to teach and guide them.

As they begin their school years, then, these students do not instinctively trust that what a teacher asks of them is in their best interest. When asked to do something, to cooperate, to become responsible members of the class, their responses are

often negative and defiant. “*You can't make me!*” This hostility is both hurtful and anger-provoking to the teacher who starts off with the best of intentions towards the student. Consequently, the teacher's frustration grows and his or her confidence and self-esteem drop.

And what happens next? Continued defiant responses from the student tend to provoke defiant, negative responses from the teacher and a downward spiral is set into motion. The student's self-esteem is lowered, making his or her chances for success even dimmer. Trust is never established, and ultimately these students fulfill the expectations that seem to have been there for them from the start. They do not do well in school. School continues to be a negative experience.

Building trust is the first step towards succeeding with difficult students.

Working successfully with difficult students begins then with a major shift in attitude. Put yourself in your student's shoes. Look at the world from his eyes—from his past experiences. Recognise that with these students your expectations that “he should trust me, and listen to me—I only want the best for him” are not realistic. This is a trust that hasn't been there, but a trust that must be nurtured before the student can be motivated to behave and do well in school.

Building trust with a difficult student will be an ongoing process. You will need to take specific steps to establish a positive relationship with this student. You will have to develop behaviour management techniques that recognise his or her individual needs. And you will have to communicate in a manner that is responsive and caring, yet firm.

As you proceed through this workbook, keep in mind that building trust is the foundation of

everything you want to achieve with a difficult student. Through your words and actions, communicate your commitment, your concern and your confidence. Empower yourself to develop a relationship with this student that can literally turn his or her life around.

Helping difficult students will be among the greatest professional experiences of your career. You can have pride and confidence in knowing that you've done the best you can and that your students have benefited.

For a comprehensive understanding of Lee Canter's Succeeding With Difficult Students™ program, please read the companion to this workbook, *Succeeding With Difficult Students*.

How to Use This Book

The *Succeeding With Difficult Students Workbook* will guide you through a step-by-step approach for individualising your behaviour management efforts with a difficult student. You will begin by identifying *why* a specific student misbehaves and then proceed to developing strategies you will use to help this student learn to behave more appropriately.

Follow these guidelines:

1. Read “Before You Begin” (page 4). This checklist of classroom behaviour management considerations will help you focus on whether excessive disruptive behaviour within your class is caused by a large number of difficult students or problems in overall behaviour management.

Teachers sometimes find that by focusing their efforts on classwide behaviour management, they

decrease the disruptive behaviour of some of their “difficult” students.

2. Identify your difficult student(s)—the ones you have determined simply will not respond to your regular behaviour management efforts. Keep in mind that you are making a commitment to this student (or students). This commitment will entail building a positive relationship, teaching appropriate behaviour and offering continuous behavioural guidance in the weeks and months ahead.

3. After you have identified your difficult student(s), begin with Part 1 and proceed sequentially through the book. For each student you identify you will be building an individualised plan—and it is important that all elements of that plan are addressed as presented.

Build a Student Profile

As you proceed through this workbook you will notice that various pages in each section have been marked “Student File Copy.”



These are the pages you will reproduce, add information to, and place in a permanent individual Student File. This file will be your ongoing guide to working more effectively with your student. The file will provide both a roadmap for your future efforts and documentation of what you have accomplished.

At the end of each section of the workbook, you will find a review that will help you organise and keep track of the most vital contents of your Student File. You will also find behaviour management reminders and information about your next step in working with your difficult student.

You are taking an important step on behalf of a student who needs the help and guidance of an adult who is willing to care. The path won't

always be smooth, but you can be assured that by consistently demonstrating your commitment, both you and your student will benefit.

Before You Begin

It is not uncommon to find that excessive disruptive behaviour within one class is caused not by a large number of difficult students, but rather by problems in the overall behaviour management of the class.

Before you begin using this program with a difficult student, ask yourself these questions:

- Do I have clearly defined classroom rules and expected behaviours? Have I taught these rules and expected behaviours to my students? Do all students know exactly what is expected of them throughout the day?
 - Do I provide consistent positive reinforcement to students who follow the rules and choose responsible behaviour?
 - Do my students know what positive reinforcement they can expect?
 - Do I consistently provide corrective actions when students misbehave? Do they know what will happen the first time they misbehave or break a rule? The second time? The third time?
 - Do the students know ahead of time the corrective actions they will receive if they choose to misbehave?
 - Do I have a clear plan of how I will respond to inappropriate behaviour?
 - Has my behaviour management plan been communicated to parents?
 - Have I taught specific behaviour expectations for all the activities students engage in within my classroom?
- Do I reteach behaviour expectations as necessary throughout the year?

If you cannot confidently answer yes to all of these questions, you may want to take a closer look at your overall classroom behaviour management.

Any behaviour management strategy that is implemented should comply with your school policy. The following resources from Lee Canter will help you create a well-managed, positive classroom environment in which you can teach and students can learn.

- *Classroom Management: Teaching Responsible Behaviour for Today's Students. 3rd Edition*
- *Classroom Management: Assertive Discipline for Teaching Responsible Behaviour for Today's Students: Primary Workbook, Years P-6*
- *Classroom Management: Assertive Discipline for Teaching Responsible Behaviour for Today's Students: Secondary Workbook, Years 7-12*