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Introduction to the Second Edition

Inappropriate behavior that leads to power struggles consumes too much instructional time in too many classrooms. Minor disruptions quickly escalate into classroom battles, eroding relationships and respect. This practical handbook is designed to provide the busy educator with specific strategies of prevention so that power struggles occur less often. By understanding what motivates students to challenge the teacher's authority, it is often quite possible to get ahead of the curve by interacting with the most difficult students in ways that will make them want to behave. This book will show you how. It also includes easy-to-learn methods of intervention that take little time and that maintain the teacher's authority and the student's dignity.

This second edition offers many new strategies of prevention and intervention, tweaks some of the strategies from the original to make their use even more effective, and adds more details as well as examples to make this volume even more user-friendly. Since the emphasis of this book is on practical strategies, there is a relative absence of the guiding theoretical framework. Interested educators can refer to several of our prior publications, which are listed in the references and resources.



When Kids Push Our Buttons

At six years old, Curtis is already a handful. He is often out of his seat, doesn't do much of his work, and likes to bully others. He is at his worst in the least supervised places like the cafeteria, hallway, and playground. When told what to do, he rarely complies. Ms. Lane has called home several times, taken recess away, changed his seat numerous times, and used stars and stickers to little avail. The color-coded (red, yellow, green) system of discipline that works for most of the "good" kids does little to influence Curtis. He misbehaves his way to "red" by 10:00 a.m. most days and therefore loses privileges.

Devon, Sherry, and Latoya are older and text their friends rather than focus on the lesson. Mrs. Martin tells each of them to put away their phones. Within seconds, they are back at it. Mrs. Martin warns that she will take the phones away, but Devon tells her that she has no right to do that. She reminds him that she is the teacher and therefore has every right to take it. Unafraid, he continues his defiance, and Mrs. Martin eventually sends him to the principal. Sherry and Latoya comply for a moment, but as soon as Mrs. Martin's back is turned, they begin texting again. Meanwhile, Julio has his head down on his desk. When called on, he has no idea what is going on and says, "This is stupid." Carl tells him to shut up, after which Samantha tells Carl to shut up. These skirmishes go on for several minutes interspersed with an occasional reference to the day's lesson.

“It would be nice to see,” or “I trust you will.” The goal is to talk to our students the same way we talk to other people in our lives. I cannot imagine saying to my wife, “I need you to do my laundry right now” or “You need to make me dinner” (and then slowly counting backward from 5 to 1 as if this will get her to oblige!).

Create an “I Am Good At . . .” Board

Have students bring in a picture of them doing one thing they are good at outside of school. On the first day of class, give each student two note cards labeled “A” and “B” with the student’s name on them. On card A, the student writes down one thing he is good at outside of school. On card B, he writes one thing he is good at inside school. Then create a large bulletin board that says, “I Am Good At . . .” Put each student’s picture on the board, along with the note cards telling what that person is good at. Now students can use the board before asking each other for help. For example, if Kristy doesn’t understand multiplication, she can look at the “I Am Good At . . .” board and find someone to help her. In our experience, it’s human nature to like helping people with things we are good at (and not like helping people with things we are not good at). Students helping each other can go a long way to prevent bullying and build a strong classroom community.

This strategy is also great if you get a new student during the school year. Before introducing the person to the class, have her look at the “I Am Good At . . .” board and pick out a few names of students she thinks could become new friends. For example, if Patricia is new and likes basketball, she can look at the “I Am Good At . . .” board to find others who enjoy basketball as well. Having something in common is so important for a new student. This also gives the teacher a structured way to introduce Patricia to students with common interests.

You can also use the board early in the school year when learning student names and interests. The board can be another tool for relationship building. You might actually put the board together after the first day of school rather than just explain it. Just be sure students bring pictures with them on the first day and you have a spot for the

bulletin board. Again, do not be afraid to get creative and add your own ideas, experiences, and spin to this activity. A final idea related to this activity is for teachers to have an “I Am Getting Better At . . .” board, which can go next to the “I Am Good At . . .” board. This is for kids who are improving in different areas but might not yet be as good as they want to be. One caution: Some kids will not bring a picture. Be sure to have a camera ready in case this happens.

Outside-of-School Relationship Building

Since there isn't always time to focus on the importance of the teacher-student relationship during instructional time, the suggestions that follow are geared toward strengthening that relationship at other times.

Call or Text Students

Some teachers we work with have expressed concerns about calling or texting students, and some schools have policies against this practice. Nevertheless, when done properly, this type of communication can be very effective. We recently met a teacher in Nebraska who gathers all his students' cell phone numbers and sends a mass text reminding them of their homework, permission slips, and upcoming tests. Be sure to take a few precautions before making the call or sending the text:

- Tell parents you might occasionally call or text their or their child's cell phone. In fact, before you call a student, call the parent to let him or her know your intentions. Explain that you don't always have time to offer specific in-depth feedback during class that could help a student be more successful. Most parents will appreciate knowing you are concerned about their child. Be sure to respect parents who do not want you to call or text.
- Tell your students you might call them at home or send a text. This way, they are not completely caught off guard and panicked when the phone rings or beeps. Assure them that if you call, it will only be to share information that you think will help them be more successful in school.

Stay Connected to Kids Without Taking What They Do and Say Personally

A major key in working with misbehaving youngsters is staying personally involved with them while refusing to take personally their obnoxious, irritating, or threatening behaviors. Again, this is not easy, and it requires that we stay in complete control of ourselves at all times.

In his pioneering work with troubled youth, Fritz Redl (1966) spoke about the importance of adults being able to manage their counteraggressive impulses toward hostile children. It is important to recognize that troubled students will make you mad; many are experienced in getting people to dislike them. Realize that most kids with chronic authority issues lack trust because they have been purposely or inadvertently hurt by caretakers they have come to count on. Many will then test caring adults by showing their worst behaviors until they are convinced that the tested adult will not stop caring about them even in the face of distasteful behavior.

Permit yourself to honestly and privately express the frustrations you are likely to feel during these periods of testing either with a trusted friend or the school counselor/psychologist. In fact, we recommend teachers have a “calm corner” in a part of their room. Consider including some sponge-material squeeze balls or overstuffed pillows for students to take out their frustrations without hurting themselves or others. The teacher should monitor this, but as long as nobody is in danger, he should allow the student some freedom to release her emotions. It is important to take good emotional care of yourself at all times. Quick stress relievers like deep breathing, forward and backward counting, listening to relaxing music, and taking a brisk walk can help. You will also need to take periodic vacations from such students. A “sick of kids day” is warranted once in a while! Develop a support network with colleagues that enables you to separate yourself from the student for brief periods. We know some teachers who use each other for temporary time-outs. They send students with challenging behaviors to each other with a certain pass that signals their need for a short break from the student. Let the student know that you are at least as stubborn as he