



Being assertive

Continuing our series on behaviour management, **Elizabeth Floyer** looks at Assertive Discipline.

How often during a teaching day do you say something like this?

- "Please will you keep the noise down?"
- "Would you return to your seat?"
- "Why haven't you got a pen?"
- "Excuse me, what are you people doing?"

What are the feelings you experience at those times? Probably irritation, frustration, anger, certainly something less than positive.

Frequent low-level misbehaviours are a major cause of stress. The cumulative impact can lead to disillusionment, burnout and emotional distress. Teaching can be a very emotional business, but our emotional needs are often ignored by the pedagogical programmes we are expected to follow.

Any programme tackling classroom behaviour management must include techniques to manage student behaviour and to fire-proof us from disruptive emotions. The **Assertive Discipline®** approach suggests how teachers can communicate their expectations in an assertive manner.

Communicating assertively is not about shouting, using sarcasm or personal criticism, which are all hostile behaviours. It avoids asking pointless questions, making vague requests, even apologising for ourselves – all passive behaviours. It is not about reacting when things go wrong – it's rather about setting things up for success.

There are two features to being assertive: the words we use and the way we say them. When we are communicating assertively we have an upright posture, with relaxed hands, allowing appropriate

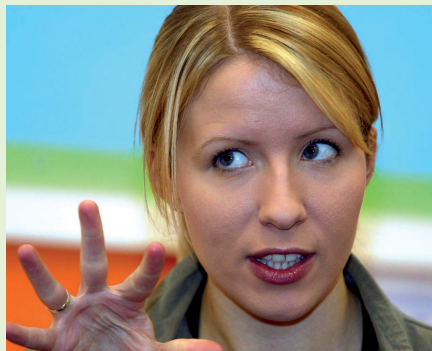
personal space, giving steady eye contact (but not demanding 'look at me' in return). We avoid aggressive gestures such as pointing fingers. Our voice is clear, audible, calm and well modulated.

Further reading

Assertive Discipline by Lee and Marlene Canter (Canter & Associates)
Three Teaching Steps to Better Behaviour by Geoff Moss (Assertive Discipline Ltd)

We clearly state appropriate behaviours at each stage of the lesson: "I need you to put your pens down now and look this way"; "I need you to return to your seat now, thank you". We say 'thank you' at the end of a statement because it assumes co-operation and gives a powerful, but not hostile, message. It is better than 'please' which suggests a request, and can sound weak and passive.

Should students argue back, we can use a 'refocusing' technique, calmly acknowledging the comment but repeating



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the direction. "Dan, I understand that you prefer to talk to Kate but right now I need you to return to your seat and continue your work. Thank you."

Once we master the verbal skills of assertive communication we always have a script for dealing with challenges from our students.

"Class, I need you all working in silence now."

"Amy put your bag away now ready to start work."

"Tom the direction is to remain in your seat for this activity."

When challenged it is easy to get lost for words, or threaten. We then risk becoming emotionally perturbed. So learning how to communicate assertively is a key skill.

An assertive manner enhances your classroom leadership. Effective classroom leaders convey positive, assertive energy.

There is a clear distinction between the adult and child roles, the teacher and learner. Children feel more secure when these roles are in place. If we are not assertive the leadership role may be taken from us by one or more students.

Truly successful leadership also requires positive relationships with students. Greet them with a smile. The key message is "I'm friendly but I'm not your friend". Teachers are friendly professionals who are interested in their students and want them to succeed.

A smile and assertive body language convey safety and create a positive atmosphere. An angry face, complaining, telling off, will create negative energy. That kind of atmosphere is neither conducive to learning nor good for our health.

So learning how to be assertive protects our personal resources and empowers us to communicate more effectively with unco-operative students. An assertive style is the bedrock of the Assertive Discipline method. By learning from its key messages, all teachers can develop effective strategies to teach better learning behaviours.

Elizabeth Floyer is a tutor on the NUT Just Qualified and Newly Qualified CPD programmes. She provides training through Behaviour & Learning Management, tel 0870 241 8262. www.behaviour-learning.com.

Asserting your needs

Non-verbal – 'body language'

- make eye contact
- close the space
- use gesture
- maintain quiet, calm tone of voice

Verbal – 'scripts'

- use name to gain attention
- use 'I' statements (eg "I need you to ...")
- state your need succinctly (avoid questions)
- use 'refocusing' technique
- use statements of understanding (eg "Okay, I appreciate that, but right now what I need is...")
- repeat as needed (don't give up)