

# Best behaviour



In the second of our series on behaviour management, educational psychologist and trainer **Rob Long** sets out some classroom behavioural guidelines.

**W**ith so much written about classroom behaviour, even the most ardent behavioural tipster appreciates that classrooms are complex places. Simplistic solutions to complex problems, which may seem the ideal answer for some, can depress and de-motivate others when they don't work. Or they work sometimes, in some places, with some students. There is a need for a general theoretical perspective. I would like to suggest the following four guidelines:

**Fight fire with water.** It's easy to provoke the wrong reaction. How do you feel when someone tells you you 'must' or 'ought' to do something? There is a human tendency to do the opposite because it seems there is an attempt to control us.

Sometimes teachers cleverly tell students not to work, because they understand that the student is very likely to insist on doing the opposite in an effort to maintain control. Also, a few students will thrive on the power they gain through refusing to change despite any sanction given.

Effective classroom managers have either learned, or develop, communication techniques to redirect inappropriate behaviours in a non-confrontational way. For example, partially accept the situation.

*Student:* "I don't want to sit there."

*Teacher:* "Maybe you don't, but ..."

Or the 'Are you all right' technique. Talking privately with the student about some behaviour, the teacher asks: "Are you all right?"

*Student:* "Yes, Why?"

*Teacher:* "Well you don't usually behave like that, so I wondered if you were OK. If there is something bothering you let me know and I will see if we can sort something out."

Simple, but the teacher has shown respect by talking with the student in private, told them that the behaviour is not acceptable and offered support.

If the teacher opts to use the 'fight fire with fire' approach, the student's nervous

system becomes over-aroused, is distracted from the behaviour but is likely to respond with a 'fight or flight' response, so creating a much more difficult situation to diffuse.

**Analyse, don't personalise.** While student behaviour is not necessarily thought out, it does have a purpose. If problem behaviour is considered as an inappropriate problem-solving technique, it is easier to see it as a form of communication. When it occurs, the teacher needs to ask: "Why here, why now and why with me?"

Some common motives for problem classroom behaviour are the need for attention, power, revenge or nurture. If the motive is evident, techniques can be tried to enable the student to get the need met more appropriately. Noting when the problem behaviour occurs will give indications for other techniques. For example, students who can do the work often disrupt during transitions, while students who cannot do the work will tend to disrupt during the work.

Another useful question is: "Is the behaviour because the student can't, or won't, do something?" A student who is polite to teachers but rude to support staff needs to be motivated to be respectful to all, while another may not know or understand the need to be respectful, or how to obtain that skill. The same behaviour may have different motives, so techniques alone are not enough without an understanding of the multi-faceted nature of behaviour.

**The problem is the problem, not the child.**

Teachers do not teach ADHD students or Asperger's students, they teach children and young people with ADHD or Asperger's. Students are children and young people first, and their entire being should not be pathologised. Remembering this

enables teachers to 'put the problem on the chair, not the child', and maintain a good relationship with the pupil. Seeing the student as the problem will damage the relationship and may lessen the young person's motivation to change.

**Behavioural mistakes are learning opportunities.** Teachers are educationalists, not custodians, and the aim is to increase a child's behavioural repertoire. If a child makes literacy or numeracy mistakes, we correct and teach appropriately. Behaviour can be seen in the same light. The teacher has to consider what skills the student needs to overcome the problem behaviour, then how these skills can be taught.

Focusing on reducing problem behaviour usually involves negative approaches and sanctions. These generate negative feelings in the student and a tendency to defensiveness and self-protection. Instead, positive feedback and encouragement can be used to teach or increase desired behaviours, leading to the development of positive feelings and giving the student the confidence to risk learning.

There is one more useful guideline: 'attitude is everything'. We each cast a shadow and we influence those we teach.

**Rob Long tutors on NUT CPD courses, including behaviour courses. For details of NUT CPD see pages 34 and 35. [www.roblong.co.uk](http://www.roblong.co.uk).**

