Managing Surface Behavior of Students


The following techniques are designed to be used by a teacher to maintain the surface behavior of children in the classroom. They are intervention techniques used spontaneously as problems or disruptions arise. They should be used in conjunction with a well-planned program based on the teacher’s knowledge of each individual student’s needs.

Non-verbal techniques for isolated problems

1. **Planned ignoring**: Much child behavior carries its own limited power and will soon exhaust itself if it is not replenished (especially if the behavior is done to “get the teachers goat”). Assuming the behavior will not spread to others, it might be possible for the teacher to ignore the behavior and thus extinguish it.

   **Example:** Bobby sometimes comes to class very excited and very active. The result of ignoring his initial antics is that he soon gets seated and relatively quiet at which time I will smile at him and touch his shoulder. He responds with a broad grin, and a positive attitude toward his time with me in class.

2. **Signal interference**: Teachers have a variety of signals that communicate to the child a feeling of disapproval and control. These nonverbal techniques include such things as eye contact, hand gestures, tapping or snapping fingers, coughing or clearing one’s throat, facial frowns, and body postures. These techniques seem most effective at the beginning stages of misbehavior.

   **Example:** When a student begins to act up, I find that a glance in his direction often will stop the behavior for a while. I find that this technique is most effective for students with whom I have developed relationships.

3. **Proximity control**: Every teacher knows how effective it is to stand near a child who is having difficulty. The teacher is a source of protection, strength, and identification and helps the child control his impulses by her proximity.

   **Example:** If a student is off task or beginning to talk while I’m talking, I will continue to talk to the group while, at the same time, I will move toward him or even stand next to him for a moment. This may go unnoticed by the other students since I normally move about the room as I talk. The result is, the child is not embarrassed or given unnecessary attention, and the talking or off task behavior stops for a time.

Using interpersonal relationship

4. **Interest boosting**: If a student’s interest in his work is declining, and he is showing signs of boredom or restlessness, it may be helpful for the teacher to show an interest in the student. The teacher may engage the student in a conversation on a topic that is of interest to him. Stimulating the child’s interest may motivate him to continue his work, and/or help him view the teacher as a person to please.

   **Example:** Fred was an avid collector of Civil War memorabilia. Fred also became bored easily because he found his assignments to be “too easy” or “the same old stuff.” When this happened, he would draw pictures or daydream and his assignments would not be completed.

   I knew a little about the Civil War, but there was much I could learn. I asked him about
the weapons of the Civil War one day when I noticed him drawing a rifle. His face brightened and he talked to me quietly for about 10 minutes. At that point, I asked him if he felt he could complete his assignment and told him I would like to talk to him again about his interests. He finished his work and now seems more interested in class.

5. **Direct appeal to values**: A teacher can often appeal to a child’s values when intervening in a problem situation. He might a) appeal to the relationship of the teacher with the child, for example, “You seem angry with me. Have I been unfair with you?” b) appeal to reality consequences, for example, “I know you’re angry, but if you break that aquarium, the fish will all die, and you’ll have to replace it with your own money.” c) appeal to a child’s need for peer approval, for example, “Your classmates will be pretty angry if you continue to interrupt them and correct them.” d) appeal to the child’s sense of the teacher’s power of authority, for example, tell him that as a teacher you cannot allow his behavior to continue, but that you still care about him. e) appeal to the child’s self-respect, for example, “I know you’ll be mad with yourself if you tear up that paper you worked on all period.”

6. **Support through humor** (*Tension decontamination through humor*): Most of us are aware of how a funny comment is able to defuse a tense situation. It makes everyone feel more comfortable.

   Example: Though I had injured my knee not long before this incident, I decided I would play football with my students. The ground was very wet from a recent rainstorm. The ball was hiked to me, and as I backed up to throw a pass, I slipped on my injured leg. The students rushing in to tag me did so just as I fell back and landed flat on my back in the mud. I could see the concern and apprehension on their faces. They were afraid I was hurt and that they had caused it. Others were scared because I had gotten muddy, and they feared I would blame them. I sat up, looked around at them and smiling, pulled a white handkerchief from my pocket and waved it indicating surrender. I also told them it looked like I was going to have to play dirty the rest of the game. They helped me up and continued the game without fear of reprisal.

**Supportive Techniques**

7. **Support from routine**: We all need structure. Some children need more than others before they feel comfortable and secure. Some become anxious without a set routine. To help these children, a daily schedule should be provided to help allay some of their feelings of anxiety. They know what is expected of them and can prepare for the activity.

8. **Restructuring the classroom program**: How much can a teacher deviate from his scheduled program and still feel he is meeting his teaching responsibilities? Some teachers feel compelled to follow their class schedule rigidly. They feel students should learn discipline and self control. Other teachers feel it is necessary to be flexible and sensitive to the students’ needs and concerns. Some middle ground seems most sensible. Discipline and structure are valuable, but not when they fly in the face of a general class need. Moderate restructuring based on affective as well as academic goals can be a very effective technique. Restructuring is appropriate when it is necessary to drain off high tension or emotion in the classroom. The technique is, as its name implies, simply a change of plan, format, task, or location based on a perceived need to drain off tension or high emotion in the total class.

   Example: Just before class, two girls got into an especially vicious fight. Students immediately formed an audience, and began speculating what caused the fight. After the fight was stopped, and students went to class, the emotions were still very high, and many students were seeking information while others were proudly telling their version of what happened. The science teacher realized how difficult it would be to have his class attend to cells, (he was also curious himself) so he opened the class to a discussion of what happened and how fighting made us feel. He was able to talk about adrenalin and muscle cells as a spin-off!

9. **Removing seductive objects**: It is difficult for the teacher to compete with certain objects, such as squirt guns and balloons and other similar seductive objects. Sometimes removing seductive objects leads to power struggles. Take a strong interest in the object and politely
ask to see it or handle it. Once in your hand, you have the option of returning it with a request for it to disappear for the remainder of the period, or to keep it with a promise to return it at the end of the period. This technique is most effective if you have a relationship with the student.

10. **Supportive Removal**: When a child’s behavior has reached a point where the teacher questions whether or not the child will respond to verbal controls, it is best to ask the child to leave the room for a few minutes - perhaps to get a drink, wash up, or deliver a message. In supportive removal, there is no intent of punishing the child, but simply to protect and help him and/or the group to get over their feelings of anger, disappointment, uncontrollable laughter, hiccups, etc. Unfortunately, many schools do not have a place to which the classroom teacher can send a child that the child will not think of as a punishment.

   **Example:** One morning during arithmetic study period, I became aware of giggling in the back of the room. I looked up to see that Joyce had evidently thought of something hilariously funny. I tried signal interference, and, though she tried to stop, she succeeded only in choking and coughing. By now, most of the children around her were aware of the circumstances and were smothering laughter, too. I hurriedly wrote a note to the secretary of the principal’s office explaining that Joyce “had the giggles”. And asked that she keep her waiting for a reply until she seemed settled down. I asked Joyce if she would mind delivering the message and waiting for an answer. I think she was grateful for the chance to leave the room. When she returned, she appeared to be under control, as was the class, and things proceeded normally.

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**Emergencies—Use only in extreme cases**

11. **Physical restraint**: Once in a while, a child will lose complete control and threaten to injure himself and others. In such emergencies, the child needs to be restrained physically. He should be held, firmly but not roughly, with no indication of punishment - only concern. Such techniques as shaking, hitting, or spanking make it harder for him to believe the teacher really wants to help him.

   The preferred physical hold is for the adult to cross the child’s arms around his sides while the adult stands behind him holding the child’s wrists. If it becomes necessary to control the child further, the adult can move the child to the floor with arms crossed in front as before, and apply his weight across the child’s hips and waist. Be careful to avoid being butted or kicked. There is no danger that the child will be injured in this position, although he might scream that you are hurting him. There are usually four different phases the child passes through:
   1) Being held, he becomes enraged. He may swear, bite, and carry on in a primitive way. The teacher, although frightened or angry, must provide the non-aggressive handling the child needs. The teacher’s control system must take over until the child’s is operating again.
   2) The child begins to cry - his defenses are down. His toughness has vanished and his inadequacy and immaturity are evident.
   3) The child becomes silent or asks to be let go. If the teacher feels the child has gained control - he lets go. The teacher, not the child, must make the decision. As he gains control, his language becomes better, more logical and coherent.
   4) He usually will try to save face by pulling away or making a sly remark.

   If possible, do not hold a child in the classroom. If it cannot be avoided, get the class away from him. Later, the teacher must explain to the class exactly what happened to save face for the child. The relationship with the child usually will improve significantly. The message the child receives is: “I care enough about you to protect you from your own dangerous impulses.”