

Managing Students with Challenging Behaviours
Or
“How to love the hard to love Child”

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Marist Youth Care is a welfare agency based in western in the west of Sydney. Our mission is to stand in solidarity with young people at risk, in their struggle for wholeness of life.

“It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up.” – Paulo Freire

Regardless of how dedicated a teacher is, there are often students who test our patience and stretch our skills. Many teachers end their day with that despairing feeling of frustration over “that child” whose behaviour is out of the ordinary. Once described as “behaviourally disordered” and now reframed as “students with challenging behaviours”, these young people stretch our skills, patience and dedication. Today these students seem more plentiful and more challenging.

The following framework is an attempt to give a practical guide towards helpful strategies. The framework involves four levels –

Level One: Myself as the Tteacher

Level Two: The Sstudent and his Nneeds and Wwants

Level Three: The Classroom Environment

Level Four: Developing the Individual Education Plan

This framework is based on a philosophy of Restorative Justice that believes that the relationship between the teacher, student and parent is paramount to positive change. All key stakeholders need to be actively engaged in significant behavioural interventions with the focus of the intervention on improved learning outcomes. All strategies need to be solution focused and forward looking. The past can collect a debris of reasons why something won't or can't work. Dwelling on past attempts can result in a debris of reasons why something won't or can't work. In the future lies the possibility for creative problem solving. Like all human habitual behaviour that is bad for us, it takes time and persistence to break the pattern of misbehaviour. Small change leads to big change over time. Students with challenging behaviours have inevitable crises and these need to be seen as opportunities for learning. Let us predict the inevitability of these setbacks while not losing sight of the small but significant gains that have been made. Most importantly a philosophy of Restorative Justice allows us to understand the true meaning of inclusiveness. Fairness is not treating every student the same but asking the critical question, “What does this student need in order to learn?”

Level One: Myself as the Teacher

Many may be surprised that an article on managing students with challenging behaviours would begin with the teacher. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy has taught us that we frequently cannot change the behaviour of another but we can determine our own set of beliefs which will have a significant impact on how effective we are as that young person's teacher. As teachers we can develop a set of helpful or hindering core beliefs about what it is like to teach these challenging students. Do we begin each day fearful of the next outburst, dreading the impending confrontation, questioning the justice of this child's presence in our classroom or even worse, questioning our own ability and lack of skills to manage this student? These hindering core beliefs will wear us down, leaving us stressed and depleted. Helpful core beliefs are not new age "Pollyanna" thinking in which the world is full of positives. Rather helpful core beliefs are grounded in reality. Compare the following –

Hindering Core Beliefs	Helpful Core Beliefs
1. It's not fair that I have to put up with that kid in my class.	This student is in my class. and like with all my students, I need to be persistent in trying to see the positives and find out how he learns best. I need to convince him that I like him.
2. No-one ever gives me any support.	I need to make sure that the Executive has a full understanding of this student and I need to ask for support.
3. I don't have the specialist skills to manage this student.	I need to look for opportunities for professional development that will benefit all of my students.
4. It is the parent's fault.	The parent needs as much support as the child. Being adversarial and blaming the parent will only contribute to the problem.

Teaching students with challenging behaviours is a stressful job and we need to be mindful of how this stress may be impacting on us. Do you have adequate supervision and times to debrief after a student outburst? Are all key

stakeholders contributing to an individualised Education Plan? Most importantly there will be days when your professionalism and goodwill are at a low ebb. We need to accept our own humanity and learn from the “not so good days”. Most of these students had behavioural difficulties before they entered your classroom and most will have them when they leave your classroom. It is not about you; you just happen to be the authority figure at the time.

Level Two: The Student and his Needs and Wants

The vast majority of challenging behaviour by students is an expression of unmet needs. Dreikurs (1982) suggests four goals of misbehaviour. Our response can either deepen the need or deflect it.

- While most children like attention, some students have an inappropriate need that presents as disruption, calling out or annoying others. The natural, but unfortunately unhelpful, response by the teacher is to respond to attention seeking with negative attention thus feeding the need. It takes a great deal of control to ignore the negative attention seeking behaviour while at the same time looking for opportunities to provide positive attention when appropriate behaviour is present.

- Some young people have had disrupted attachments in their life and so they seek to take personal control by buying into power struggles. These non compliant students do not appear to respond to rewards and punishments because the need for power is above this. Oppositional Defiant students frequently are motivated by power. Direct them to do something and they will do the opposite because it means they win. As hard as it is, teachers need to refrain from “buying into” not “buy into” the power struggles but use by using the language of choice.
“John you need to contribute to the group or work by yourself. It is up to you.”

The teacher then walks away giving the student time to choose...

“John, you understand the plan, either choose to work by yourself or in the group or you go to the office.”

The teacher then walks away giving the student time to choose.

Oppositional students often have an intense need to win and this is often expressed by a strong desire to “have the last word” by making “a parting shot”. As difficult as this is for the teacher, the best response is simply to let them. (Hewitt, 1999)

- Martin Seligman (1995) first coined the term “learned helplessness” to describe young people who disguise their inadequacies with a refusal to attempt what they are not good at. Parents and teachers of students with special needs know that to do everything “for them” is counter-productive.

Some students will go to extraordinary lengths to disguise their inadequacies, particularly a low level of literacy. We need to make sure that we do not buy into the student's sense of helplessness, so closing off all future pathways. Entry points into learning need to be creatively sought – through games, interests and enterprise education.

- Some young people have a heightened sense of justice and when they feel they have been wronged they react through revenge. This planned aggression can be active or passive. The student actively destroys the lesson or passively refuses to do anything. This particular type of behaviour is best addressed, if possible, through a quiet and private conversation. When did the student feel wronged, and how can the relationship be restored?

Unfortunately, many students with challenging behaviours have all of these unmet needs. A critical skill is to understand what is their base line behaviour. Understanding this can allow the teacher to be mindful of when the behaviour is escalating. One student's base line behaviour may be highly agitated, while another student's base line behaviour may be detached and uninvolved. It is little wonder that the casual teacher who does not know or understand these students has more serious behaviour incidents.

If these are the unmet needs of these students, what are their wants? They are the same wants as all young people have – to belong, to feel safe, to achieve and to relate. In response to these students' needs the greatest gift we can give them is a relationship that is unconditional in its regard. The teacher is the constant in their lives who will not give up on them but strives for better ways for them to be a member of the class.

"The incident yesterday in our class was inappropriate. Yes, there are consequences but there are also learnings. If the same situation happened again how could you behave differently to get a better outcome? Let's have a fresh start today"

Sometimes these words are hard to say because underpinning them is the value of forgiveness.

Level Three: The Classroom

The classroom can be the safe and controlled context in which new behaviours can be learned. Christine Richmond (2005) provides an excellent framework that emphasizes clear expectations as the foundations for sound management. For students with challenging behaviours there can be no ambiguity. They need the clarity of expectations and routines. Coupled with this is the fine but delicate balance between acknowledgement and correction. Students with behaviour difficulties get significantly more times the number of statements of correction than acknowledgments. The Richmond model cautions against too little or too much correction or acknowledgement.

Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI) is a program developed by Cornwall University (2001) specifically for the management of young people with challenging behaviours. Having established base line behaviour TCI advocates nine behavioural interventions to de-escalate an individual's behaviour with the aim of avoiding an outburst. These nine strategies move from the least intrusive to the most intrusive.

1. **Managing the Environment:** This looks at all the extraneous strategies that the classroom environment can provide. There should be a minimum of classroom rules that are clearly stated in a positive way and displayed in the classroom. These are negotiated with the students with appropriate consequences. (Rogers, 1995, 1995) Highly supported by research this simple but powerful strategy is largely ignored by secondary teachers who wrongly assume that "by this age the students should just know what is expected of them." The illogic in this is evident when one considers that most secondary students have up to seven teachers with varying expectations in a time in their life when they are most prone to rule breaking.
The use of visuals can reinforce key messages in a non verbal non-verbal way. A "Stop / Go" sign, red on one side and green on another can indicate to the student when he is off task and on task.
2. **Prompting:** This is signaling to the student to either begin a desired behaviour or stop an inappropriate behaviour and is done in a non critical way either through a verbal statement such as, as, "It's time to pack up the equipment" or using a non-verbal signal such as pointing to the rule on the poster. Some teachers use a secret non-verbal sign that has been previously negotiated with the student. Prompts should be given only once or twice or they become nagging.
3. **Caring Gesture:** The greatest tool in the classroom is the relationship that the teacher has with the student. Early escalation of behaviour can be managed through a sincere display of affection by the teacher – a simple pat on the shoulder, or an encouraging comment. Students will sense if this is insincere or manipulative.
4. **Hurdle Help:** Sometimes students experience frustration when they are unable to complete a task. The teacher simply assists the student with the early steps until the student is confident to work alone. The non-compliant student who refuses to pick up the paper in the playground may be more willing if he sees his teacher also picking up papers. The student may be more willing to clean the graffiti off the desk if the teacher offers to assist him.

5. Redirection: This can assist a student or group to calm down and return to normal functioning. Diverting the student's attention to a substitute activity can de-escalate the situation. Ask the student to assist you to do something or take a message to another teacher or work on the computer for ten minutes.
6. Proximity: Many teachers assume that a student with challenging behaviours is best seated close to the teacher to maximize supervision. This can in effect be counter-productive since the more the authority figure of the teacher is around, the greater the escalation of oppositional behaviour. (Hewitt, 1999) Some teachers ask the student to nominate a positive peer to be seated with the student and may indicate to the student when they observe off task or escalating behaviour. When approaching a particularly agitated student it is best to do so from the side rather than from the front as it is less confrontational.
7. Planned Ignoring and Positive Attention: As previously stated, attention seeking behaviour needs to be ignored if possible. This is with the judgment of the teacher that the behaviour is not potentially harmful to the student or others. This becomes a powerful strategy when coupled with positive attention when the desired behaviour is present. The latter requires a great deal of conscious effort on the part of the teacher since we are drawn to noticing inappropriate behaviour, rather than the appropriate behaviour. The old catch cry, "catch them being good" still holds true today.
8. Directive Statements: As students' behaviour escalates, so their rational thinking diminishes. Direct statements should be clear and specific and said in an authoritative rather than an authoritarian manner. The Broken Record approach calmly repeats a request several times, without being drawn into the argument. (Lillico, 2005)
9. Time Away: When all other de-escalating strategies have been tried, it may be that the student needs to be removed from the classroom or learning space. Time away is not the punitive strategy of Time Out. Rather it offers the student an opportunity to go to an alternative place with the clear understanding that when they are calm and ready to join the rest of the class then they can return. Time Away can be to a place in the classroom, to the office or in its most extreme, some time at home. A positive re-entry is critical to the success of this strategy.

Level Three: Developing an Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Reiterating the theme that "fairness isn't sameness", some students cannot be managed, and more importantly cannot learn, through the same strategies as the rest of the class. Some individuals need Individual Education Plans. The first vital

question to ask is “Who are the key stakeholders?” Each of these people will have some level of understanding of the young person’s needs and more importantly, what strategy could respond to these needs. Key stakeholders could include – classroom teachers, year coordinators, executive, student, parent or carer, counsellor, special education teacher, representative from outside agencies. The coordinator of the meeting should be appointed from this group. The student should be encouraged to attend if they have the willingness and maturity to participate. Frequently it is helpful to have a supportive peer to accompany the student.

- At the beginning of each meeting it should be made clear that the meeting and the IEP are about enhancing learning and inclusion in the school community. IEP meetings are not a time for venting or debriefing. They are strategy based, forward looking and optimistic.
- At the first meeting members are asked to name the student’s strengths, interests and needs. Members then prioritise the behaviours that are of concern. Those behaviours which are either dangerous or most likely to change are given first priority. These behaviours are then reframed into a positive statement. For example: “Walks around the room constantly” would be changed to “Stays in his seat for thirty minute periods”. (Richmond, 1996)
- As the strategies evolve a plan is formulated that documents specific strategies, person responsible and time frame of implementation.
- For students with extremely challenging behaviours the IEP will need to be both realistic and creative. If a placement at school is in jeopardy, then partial enrolment should be considered, attending only those subjects or times of the day when the student is most responsive.
- IEP meetings and the plan itself should be continually evolving in response to the ongoing, developing needs of the student. New expectations should reflect new strategies. If partial enrolment was at one point a strategy, the IEP should look at gradual reintegration if at all possible.
- At each meeting key stakeholders should evaluate each strategy, perhaps using a rating scale from 1-10 in which (10) represents highly successful. This approach forces everyone to focus on the success of the strategy, however small, rather than making global judgments about whether the student has been “fixed up yet”. All stakeholders need to be encouraged to focus on the small but real changes that have been gained.
- If an IEP meeting follows a serious incident and/or a suspension then built into the plan should be strategies for repairing the damaged relationship(s) and how the student may need to make restitution. If this does not occur then the student may be set up for further failure. Why would a distressed teacher and / or student welcome back a student who has offended them? Similarly, why would a student who feels unjustly accused return to school not revengeful? Bringing together these key parties using Restorative Practices has a significant chance of healing these damaged relationships and planning or achieving a positive way forward.

Conclusion:

Students with challenging behaviours are the emerging priority for many schools. People of good will are tested. Frequently hurt occurs as the blame game prevails. While research strongly supports an inclusive response, this can only be achieved through a well planned well-planned, collaborative approach that embraces all the key stakeholders and is forward looking and optimistic. In all of this we need to be mindful not only of the needs of the young person, but also his teacher(s), fellow students and his parents or carers. Yes, it is hard work but these are the seeds of hope for the future.

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