"The best discipline plans strive to limit the need for punishments and negative consequences by having a preventive emphasis."

– Mark Boynton and Christine Boynton, *The Educator's Guide to Preventing and Solving Discipline Problems*

Negative consequences are necessary when other approaches to problem behaviour are unsuccessful. However, they are not effective when overused.

Establish consequences to inappropriate behaviours ahead of time; for example:

- owing time at recess, lunch or after school to make up for time lost in class
- loss of free choice or other classroom privileges
- moving the student's desk away from peers.

The most effective consequences are:

- immediate (but not disruptive or intensive)
- reasonable (and not embarrassing or frustrating)
- well-planned (but flexible)
- practical and easy to implement.

Since the goal is to reduce the incidence of a specific problem behaviour, teachers have to monitor the effectiveness of negative consequences, and adapt and change them as needed.

Focus on the behaviour

Disapprove of the behaviour, not the student. Use words and/or actions that focus on the problem behaviour. This approach tells the student that the adult believes he or she is capable of behaving in positive ways. It also reduces power struggles that can create a negative atmosphere in the classroom.

Begin with low-key responses

Feedback

Both verbal and nonverbal feedback are effective responses to problem behaviour. For example, say the student's name out loud with an accompanying gesture such as fingers over lips. Or use just one or two words such as, "Jordan, chair" when a student is rocking back on two chair legs.

Actions, not words

When possible, use actions rather than words. For example, if two students are whispering during a lesson, stop talking and wait patiently for them to stop. Then continue the lesson without a reprimand. If a student is bouncing a ball in the gym while instructions are being given, simply walk over and collect the ball until the instructions are finished. Return the ball when the activity starts. Talking less and acting more can often bring about positive classroom change without paying an excessive amount of attention to problem behaviour. Taking action also communicates that learning and teaching are important and need to be the focus.

Proximity

Send a quiet and effective message about behavioural expectations by moving around the classroom while teaching and stopping for a moment near specific students. Standing near a student who is engaged in disruptive and/or attention-seeking behaviour is often enough to end the behaviour. This technique communicates, even without eye contact, that the teacher knows what is happening in the classroom and expects positive behaviour.

Hurdle helping

Offer encouragement, support and assistance to prevent students from becoming frustrated with learning activities. This kind of help can take many forms, from enlisting a peer for support to supplying additional information and hints that will help the student complete the learning task successfully.

Eye contact

Eye contact lets students know the teacher is aware of what they are doing. Eye contact with a smile that says "thank you" will often stop problem behaviour and allow learning to continue without disruption.

Students' names

Using students' names intentionally and positively lets them know they are not anonymous. (This is particularly important at the secondary level.)

To deal with low-level problem behaviour, try including a student's name with the information or instructions being delivered. This technique gets the student's attention and lets him or her know that the teacher has noticed the behaviour.

Be aware that a name can be spoken in any number of ways, with different intonations that communicate different messages.

Gestures

Simple hand or face movements can communicate a message. For example, a nod of the head means "yes," and a smile can communicate "thank you." A teacher of younger students might hold up four fingers to tell a student to keep four chair legs on the floor.

A brief touch on a student's desk or chair is a low-key way of communicating about the need to stop inappropriate behaviour. It is not always necessary to make eye contact, and the touch can be light and quick enough that other students are not likely to notice it.

Gestures can be effectively combined with proximity, eye contact and using the student's name.

Redirecting

Sometimes simply redirecting a student from one area or activity to another area or activity will stop a problem behaviour. Redirecting can be done to:

- create a diversion (e.g., "Time for a break, go and get a drink of water")
- introduce a more appropriate replacement behaviour (e.g., "Please take your library book to the reading corner. You can talk with your friend about it there")
- remove the context that is triggering a problem behaviour (e.g., "Time to put away the math blocks").

Pausing and waiting

A pause can effectively draw students' attention back to the task at hand. If after four or five seconds the pause has not helped the students refocus, try other strategies.

Planned ignoring

Ignoring students who engage in attention-seeking behaviour but are not interfering with teaching or learning usually causes the behaviour to stop. Carry on as if nothing has happened and avoid any indication of annoyance or frustration, which would give the student the attention he or she is seeking.

Planned ignoring behaviour is challenging, as the inappropriate behaviour often increases before it decreases. Methods of planned ignoring include breaking eye contact, moving to another area of the classroom and engaging in another activity. Use this strategy for minor inappropriate behaviours that do not compromise the safety or well-being of others.

In some cases, it may be necessary to coach other students on how to support this strategy by either removing themselves as an audience or following the teacher's cue to ignore a certain behaviour.

Increase the level of the response

If a problem behaviour continues after a teacher has tried one or two low-key responses, an increased level of response may be required.

The following steps can be used to intervene when a student is misbehaving, with minimal disruption to the class.

1. Pause.

2. Slowly turn towards the student. Stand close, make eye contact and use a quiet voice.

3. Make a verbal request to stop. Use statements rather than questions. Frame the request positively; for example, "Back to work, please." Use a neutral tone and avoid lecturing. Generally use less than 10 words, but provide clear direction, kindly and firmly.

4. Make one detailed request at a time.

5. Asking twice is sufficient.

6. Remain unemotional.

7. Give the student time to respond. Counting to 10 is a good wait time.

8. Say "thank you" to verbally reinforce cooperation.

Making an agreement

Judah's habit of tapping his pencil on his desk while working is annoying both the teacher and the students who sit around him. Rather than lecture him about his behaviour, Judah's teacher talks with him one day before school and they agree on a single word, "pencil," and a silent signal that the teacher will use when Judah begins to tap his pencil. When he sees the signal, or his teacher walks by and quietly says "pencil," Judah is reminded to stop tapping his pencil.

Offer limited choices

Providing reasonable and positive choices puts the responsibility for positive behaviour back on the student. For example, "You can work quietly as a group or you can choose to work independently at your desks."

Good choices:

- are related to the problem behaviour
- are not seen as punishment
- are not delivered as ultimatums
- are offered in a positive or neutral tone
- allow for consistent follow-through.

Providing limited choices:

- can make difficult problems easier for students to solve
- respects students' abilities to make decisions and gives them a sense of ownership
- helps students learn what appropriate choices are.

When offering choices:

1. Stop, pause and turn to or approach the student.
2. If possible, move to a private area where other students cannot hear the conversation.
3. Provide the student with a choice or ask him or her to make a choice. "Decide, please."
4. Wait for a verbal or nonverbal answer. It may be a response that allows the student to save face.
5. Say "thank you."

For example, "You must complete this math assignment, but you can choose to do the even-numbered questions or the odd-numbered ones." Or, "You cannot push people down and take away their toys. But you can choose to apologize now or sit out until you cool off and then apologize."

Make the choices reasonable, appropriate and acceptable. For example, young students might have a choice between only two alternatives. "You can visit the math centre or the writing centre. Which would you prefer?" Older students can handle a broader array of choices and are better able to deal with the consequences of their decisions. For example, "Your research project is due in two weeks. What format would you like to use for it?"

Appropriate choices make sense in the context of the problem and do not cause harm.

Don't offer an option that is not viable. For example, "You can do your writing assignment now or you can do it at recess," is only acceptable if a staff member is available to supervise the student who chooses to stay in at recess.

Some students may require thinking time before deciding which choice to make. How much time is appropriate depends on the situation and the choices offered.

Implied choices come into play if a negative behaviour occurs again, either by the same student or group, or by another student or group of students who are aware of the choices. For example, a pair of students is asked to choose whether to work quietly together or independently at their desks. They work quietly for a period of time and then become noisy. They are in effect choosing to work quietly at their desks. Similarly, another pair of students is aware of the available choices, so they know they are choosing to work independently if they become noisy while working together.

Ask questions

Behaviour is more effectively changed when an adult intervenes by asking questions rather than lecturing. Sometimes asking questions encourages students to make judgements, consider consequences, and be accountable for their actions and words. Ultimately, question asking teaches students to think for themselves and to turn mistakes into learning opportunities.

For example, ask:

- "What do you think the problem is?"

- "Is what you are doing working? Why or why not?"

- "What would happen if …?"

- "How will you remember to …?"

Take time to talk

An informal chat outside of instructional time can lead to an informal agreement. Like a number of other strategies, the informal chat shifts responsibility for the problem behaviour to the student. The adult and student discuss and develop a positive plan of action; both individuals share in the responsibility for implementing the plan. The chat can also help the adult and student to re-establish a positive relationship.

To conduct an informal chat:[6]

- greet the student and create a positive atmosphere. Sit somewhere other than at the teacher's desk, which can be seen as having positional power

- define the problem to ensure a shared understanding

- work with the student to generate alternatives

- jointly agree on an alternative to try and when to begin

- review what has been agreed upon. Ask the student to restate the agreement in his or her own words

- end the chat with a comment or gesture that communicates a positive tone.

Create a thinking space

Sports teams ask for time out to bring players off the field and allow them to catch their breath, discuss a new strategy or plan and regroup. Some students who misbehave need a time out, that is, a short break from class activities before rejoining the group. The goal is for the student to regain emotional control.

Consider setting up a safe space in the room where individual students can go to calm down, think about their choices and, if needed, make a plan before rejoining the group. The thinking space can be a desk and chair in a private corner that is out of the direct view of other students but that the teacher can see. When possible, avoid using screens and other barriers that isolate students, as they not only interfere with supervision but also may be humiliating and/or distressful for some students.

Set up a classroom exchange

Sending a student to a thinking space in a nearby classroom can be particularly effective when a peer audience in the student's classroom is reinforcing the problem behaviour.

Look for logical consequences

Consequences should be logically connected to the problem behaviour. For example, if students argue over a book, the book is removed and neither student gets to use it for that day. If the connection between the problem behaviour and the consequence isn't obvious, the consequence probably isn't logical or appropriate. Note, however, that every behaviour does not have a logical consequence, and consequences cannot solve every problem.

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6. Adapted with permission from Barrie Bennett and Peter Smilanich, *Classroom Management: A Thinking and Caring Approach* (Toronto, ON: Bookation Inc., 1994), p. 291.

The following guidelines can help to ensure that students understand the consequences and that consequences are not actually "disguised punishment."

- Plan consequences in advance.

- Choose consequences that are helpful, not hurtful.

- Focus on the future, not the past.

- Involve students in identifying and choosing logical consequences, and let them decide what consequences will be most helpful.

- Help students make the opportunity–responsibility–consequence connection by asking "what" and "how" questions.

Defuse power struggles

Some students who engage in power struggles are intelligent and have well-developed language skills but tend to act in their own interest and have a capacity to manipulate others and generate anger easily. Other students engage in power struggles because they have limited skills for getting what they want or handling frustration. Power struggles can also be triggered by a lack of sleep, hunger or tensions at home.

Power struggles often involve distracting the person in power by raising irrelevant side issues or asking why. Respond to such tactics not by arguing but rather by focusing on a solution to the problem, or by giving a firm direction or choice.

Recognize a power struggle for what it is and then, if possible, ignore the student's attempt to engage in one. If this approach does not work:

1. Stop teaching and pause.

2. Turn slowly to face the student.

3. Make eye contact.

4. Take one or more slow deep breaths.

5. Do or say something to shift the locus of control to the student. For example:
   a. Describe the situation to the student and explain that you are not going to engage in an argument. For example, "We have only fifteen minutes left for groups to complete their plan. I need to help the last two groups now. I can't spend the time arguing with you."
   b. Give the student a choice. For example, "You can go back and work with your group or finish the plan on your own at that table. Please choose one now."

6. Pause and allow the student to save face—perhaps by making a comment or taking an action.

7. Bring closure by saying "Thank you" or "I appreciate it."

A conflict requires at least two people—school staff can avoid power struggles with students by choosing not to take part in that struggle. Staff need to develop disengaging tactics for handling conflict situations in a calm, professional manner.

Sample strategies for disengaging from power struggles

- *Use a stress-reduction technique before responding to a remark or behaviour.*
  Take a deep breath and release slowly. This technique can not only ground you but gives you an additional moment to plan an appropriate response.

- *Use a neutral, business-like voice.*
  Since people tend to interpret their emotional states from their own behavioural cues, people who speak calmly (no matter how they feel) are more likely to believe that they are calm, even in stressful situations.

- *Keep responses brief.*
  Short responses prevent inadvertently rewarding defiant behaviour with too much adult attention.

Some power struggles are a result of students not being able to control their own frustration and/or anger. In some situations, it may be helpful to use well-timed, supportive techniques that "interrupt" the escalation of student anger and redirect students to activities that will create opportunities to calm down, such as reading a book or working on the computer.

Occasionally, it may be necessary to briefly remove a student from the classroom if he or she is becoming argumentative or defiant. For example, asking a student to work at a table outside the classroom for a few minutes could prevent a student's behaviour from escalating into a full-fledged confrontation.

Use office referrals

It is sometimes appropriate to ask a student to leave the classroom and go to the office. For this strategy to be effective, all staff in the school must understand the school-wide agreement on:

- reasons for sending students to the office

- how this will be done (e.g., teachers phone the office to let the secretary know)

- what will happen when a student arrives at the office (e.g., the student is asked to sit quietly and wait for the teacher to come within 15–20 minutes to help resolve the problem, or the student is asked to complete a problem-solving sheet in a quiet, supervised area)

- the roles and responsibilities of school staff (including classroom teacher, school secretary, administrator)
- follow-up procedures (e.g., the student completes behaviour reflection sheet or the administrator phones the parents).

See *Tool 1: Behaviour Reflection* for a sample tool for students to record reflections on their behaviour.

Use contracts

A formal contract can be used to require a student to either demonstrate positive behaviour or face a negative consequence such as the loss of privileges (e.g., participating in lunchroom programs or extracurricular activities).

A formal contract includes a statement of the acceptable behaviours (and if necessary, an explicit statement of what is unacceptable) and outlines the rewards (e.g., retaining privileges, being allowed to stay in school) and consequences for engaging in negative behaviours. All parties review the contract and sign it. The "parties" may include (but are not limited to) the administrator, the teacher, the student, parents and any other members of the student's learning team such as school counsellors or family liaison workers.

Ideally, a formal contract:

- is easy for all those involved to understand
- clearly and concisely identifies acceptable behaviours, unacceptable behaviours, the cueing signals the teacher will use to indicate unacceptable behaviour and the consequences if the student chooses to engage in unacceptable behaviour
- is sensitive to the needs of the student
- identifies positive reinforcement and negative consequences
- clearly identifies who will monitor whether the contract is being followed and who will implement rewards and consequences
- is clearly communicated to parents (when possible, parents are also involved in structuring and implementing the contract terms).