

Responding to bad behavior

Bad behavior is not a good thing at all in a classroom and you cannot ignore it -- otherwise it will get worse. The problem is that it is easy for your response to be ineffective or even make the situation worse.

There are many ways of responding to bad behavior. Here are just a few.

Basic rules

Bad behavior, not bad person

Adopt an attitude that behavior can be bad and unacceptable, but this does not mean the person is bad. A bad person is unredeemable and cannot be changed. A basically good person can be separated from bad behavior, especially if you act as if this is what they really want.

Act, but do not react

Reacting means acting instinctively, without thought. Unfortunately, our instincts were largely sharpened in the relatively recent ecological past of the primate jungle, where aggression is an appropriate response. A natural response to bad behavior is anger, but unfortunately this only creates more problems, if not today then certainly in the future.

Acting means thinking first, and then acting in a way that will achieve a good result for the student, for you and for the school. This may not mean an immediate response, and giving a little time to cool down (and let them cool down) can be very productive. An effective approach is to hold back disruptive students at the end of the lesson.

Analyze, then respond

Seek first to understand the real reason why they are naughty, then design your actions to address the deeper motivations. Done well, this can be very effective.

Be consistent and fair

When you are responding to bad behavior, always be clearly fair. Treat each incident separately and be equal-handed with all. If you make rules then you must always follow them up. If you use a punishment with one child, you must be prepared to use it with others.

However, do remember that different responses work differently with different students. Customise what you do to have the appropriate effect. And always keep your cool, of course.

Inattention

When they are not paying attention you can:

- Use silence, just standing and looking at them. When they pay attention, thank them and continue.
- Remove the source of distraction, for example confiscating magazines and toys.
- Call them back after class and keep them waiting for a while as you ignore them whilst clearing up. Then talk about paying attention to one another.

Side conversations

Some students often prefer to chat with their friends rather than join in the lesson. It is generally a bad idea to try and talk over side conversations.

- Ask one of the talkers a question about the work, or just a general question, such as 'So, Michael, what would you have done in this situation?'
- Ask the rest of the class what you should do about the people involved. When they hear their name, and especially when they realize everyone else is talking about them, they will stop talking.
- Interpose your body between the talkers (easily done if they are quite distant from one another).
- Separate the talkers, moving them near people with whom they are unlikely to converse.

Heckling

When their jibes are directed at you, then you can defuse their comments in many ways.

- Ask them to explain what they mean. Keep questioning them until they get a bit embarrassed.
- Ask them why they made the comment. If they make another smart response, reject it and return to the original question. Force them to think more deeply.
- Reframe their comment, reinterpreting it as if it were positive.
- Ask the class if that was a smart comment.

- If the comments are inappropriate, call them out immediately. Say that the comment was inappropriate and give them a chance to apologize. If they do not, then take them to the next stage, for example holding them back after class or sending them to the head teacher.

Threatening

When students threaten one another or otherwise cause fear or anger within the classroom,

- Ask them directly what they are doing.
- Ask the class what they think. Ask if the behavior is appropriate.
- Separate the parties.
- If necessary, send the aggressor out of the classroom. Tell them to cool down (and only then reason with them).
- Follow up separately with aggressor, victim and observers. Get the whole story.
- If the behavior is a repeat, then move the aggressor to the next stage of the school discipline system.

Fighting

Sometimes fights break out in the classroom. These can be of two very different sorts. One is due to bullying (and can be initiated by the victim 'snapping'), the other is pecking-order disputes. Neither is acceptable, of course, and must be dealt with carefully.

- Do not put yourself between the fighters unless you are very certain you can separate them little harm and within legal constraints.
- Use a clear, commanding voice, tell them to stop, now.
- Get other children away from harm's way.
- If feasible, dousing them with water can be effective.
- Send one of other children to get help as appropriate.
- Put both of them through the school system for fights.