

Want Better Behavior in Your Classroom? NJEA Review 2012

Try these three antidotes for redirecting challenging behaviors!

Before my feet landed in a classroom, my teacher training supervisor grounded my practice with this guidance: build rapport, relationship and a positive culture in everything you do. Dr. Evangelisto was not breaking new ground nor was he a Kumbaya theorist of airy, soft “feel good” management practices for reaching and teaching learners with or without difficult and challenging behaviors.

From Erickson to Glasser to Wong to Marzano and all researchers who came before and those who will come after, the value of rapport, relationship, and positive school and classroom culture has always been emphasized. In fact, these elements are known preventatives and antidotes for the behavioral challenges of students with social and/or emotional issues that manifest in what psychologist Robert Brooks calls typical self-defeating behaviors: quitting, avoiding, controlling, clowning, bullying, and denial.

On any given day, when self-defeating behaviors show up in class, staff may be driven to reactive and ineffective practices that escalate matters. Raised voices, glaring eyes, yelling, threats, humiliations, and power plays played out publicly only serve to worsen the situation and the general classroom climate. When reactions don't bring the desired result, we tend to get more reactive.

Why we get driven to and by reaction

Reactive behavior is what humans of all ages do in the face of too much frustration, stress, and fear from a real or perceived threat. Under reaction, our knowledge of healthier and more effective ways to handle situations gets lost in translation. We may know better, but we don't do better.

When frustration, stress, and threat rise, the human capacity for empathy, problem solving and wise decision making gets snared in the struggle to survive. So does our ability to remain objective. Just when we need to keep our wits about us to respond and not react to behavior, we become driven by fight, flee, and freeze behaviors. We resort to knee-jerk reactions and ineffective behavior management techniques that expose the weak links in positive classroom climate and management efforts. Relationship, rapport, and a positive culture fly out the window just when we need them the most.

What can be done?

There are three strategic practices that make a positive difference:

1. Create a “well-being” classroom.
 2. Use collaborative problem solving for chronic behavioral issues.
 3. Apply restorative discipline techniques to develop personal responsibility, accountability and influence social decision making.
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1. Establish a firmly rooted positive culture groundwork

Today’s classroom managerial and environmental focus is on using PBS or positive behavioral supports. PBS is a framework of practices long proven to be effective in creating and cultivating classroom environments that lay the foundation and provide subsequent support for positive social, emotional, behavioral, and academic performance. I’ve noticed some misconceptions about PBS and offer these clarifications.

- PBS is more than a sum of techniques. It is a way of *being*.
- PBS happens *alongside*, not instead of, solid classroom management practices. Rules, procedures and routines must be clear, created with student input, and reinforced through consistent and deliberate feedback, preferably positive.
- PBS means higher, not lower, expectations. Higher expectations require scaffolds: structures, skills, strategies, and supports.
- PBS invites students to develop personal responsibility and accountability.
- PBS emphasizes problem solving, not problem struggle.
- PBS acknowledges mistakes as opportunities to teach skills and correct errors.

PBS for well-beings

The research on resilience shows that caring, supportive relationships, especially with a competent adult, are a core developmental support for at-risk children and youth. I haven’t met

many teachers who don't care about their students. I have seen situations where competence, care and concern get lost in translation.

The way we do the things we do matters greatly. As Stanford University Professor Emeriti and former New Jersey educator Nel Noddings wrote, "It is obvious that children will work harder and do things—even odd things like adding fractions—for people they love and trust."

PBS as a way of "being" means safety and security are established through connection and belonging. In climates where relationship and rapport come first, teachers know students individually, build upon their strengths, and use practices that model a pro-social climate.

In well-being classrooms, we catch the child being and doing "good." Even though the learner is meeting behavioral expectations, we still express appreciation. We say "please" and "thank you" as common courtesy.

We avoid negative mindsets and self-talk such as, "Why should I notice and name something the student is supposed to be doing?" Or, "If I take the time to do this, we won't get through." Or, "That's not how it is in the real world."

The following simple techniques are a sample of practices that deliver desired results:

Notice, name, and appreciate. Pay public attention to the students who are doing what they are supposed to be doing. Be specific about what you are noticing and appreciating. In addition to affirming the student, this technique also allows learners not meeting expectations to get on board.

Here's a basic script: I notice (student's name) is (specific behavior). Thank you for (classroom expectation met). I really appreciate it!

For example, I notice Jan, Tom, Eric, Lanaya, and Christian are all standing quietly in line and are ready to go to art. Good job following procedures. Thanks!

When most students see their classmates receive positive attention, it serves as a cue. Most, if not all, quickly follow the lead. Notice their positive behavior, too! You may have students who have chronic difficulties meeting simple expectations and who don't respond to notice, name, and appreciate. Problems such as these are briefly addressed in the collaborative problem solving strategic approach (see #2 on next page).

Consciously practice a social skill (per week or more if needed). Social competence is among the developmental traits associated with resilience. When students lack such skills or don't use

what they know, teach or emphasize them. Skills are taught in a conscious, deliberate way. Model. Practice. Coach the use. Give feedback. Make corrections.

Consider inviting students to choose the skill they would like to improve or do as a classwide (or building) initiative. For instance, if students are putting down or getting snarky with each other, you can teach and emphasize the “Be Your BEST” strategy, courtesy of the Rutgers University Social and Emotional Learning Laboratory.

Body posture (neutral, non-threatening pose).

Eye contact (look at, not through or away).

Say appropriate things. (Some students may need coaching with what is and is not appropriate.)

Tone of voice.

Use a micro-formative assessment. It could be a self-rating scale, peer-to-peer partner rating, a whole class chart, or a combination of these. Recognize BEST students; do not penalize students who haven't made the grade.

Teach “stop and breathe” and grounding techniques. When emotions take charge of behavior, “stop and breathe” is an effective de-escalation method. Train students in advance. When needed, simply and silently cue the student to use the strategy. The website Capacitar International (www.capacitar.org/emergency_kits.html) provides step-by-step guidance in how to teach breathing and other stress reducing techniques.

2. Use collaborative problem solving (CPS) with students who have chronic behavior issues

Psychologist Ross Greene has successfully adapted a coaching practice into a three-step model educators can use with their students who have ongoing, challenging behaviors. This highly effective collaborative process between teacher (or staff) and student also fosters a helping relationship between them. They become a team working objectively on a troublesome issue.

CPS is based on these two beliefs:

- Students want to do well.
- Their chronic problems are the result of lagging skills and unsolved problems.

When we understand students want to do well, our perspective shifts from the negative mode of problem struggle into the positive action of problem solving. We activate empathy for the plight of the student and the concerns that drive his or her behavior. We engage in a collaborative process to identify what Greene calls “actionable information” and then we act on it with caring competence.

Collaborative problem solving uses these three steps:

- **Empathy:** With compassion, the teacher gathers information from the student to better understand the student’s concerns that drive the behavior.
- **Define the problem:** The teacher brings her concerns or perspective to the problem-solving table.
- **Invitation:** The teacher invites the student to identify realistic solutions and then helps the student fine-tune the strategy and coaches its use.

As most problem solvers know, sometimes solutions need revisiting and tinkering. If the solution doesn’t achieve the desired result, we don’t dismiss it as “nothing works.” We also understand that chronic problems don’t happen overnight and their antidotes may take time and repeated conferences to adjust the plan of action. The idea here is to remove reaction and move in a positive, solution-oriented direction.

Showing compassion and expressing empathy for the lagging skills and unsolved problems of learners makes an amazing difference in student accountability, responsibility, and responsiveness to the helping relationship fostered by the teacher. As a behavioral coach/consultant, I have helped teachers use this positive practice on site in two inner city schools. The process produced excellent results in cases where teachers were on board and committed to making positive change.

For an in-depth understanding of CPS, more information on how to put the strategy into practice, and a list of typical lagging skills and unsolved problems, read Greene’s book and visit the CPS website www.cps.info/cpessentials.

3. Apply restorative discipline techniques

The word “discipline” comes from the Latin “discere” meaning “to learn.” The roots of restorative discipline (RD) come from restorative justice (RJ) practices. Some people misunderstand RJ as a consequence-free practice. It’s not. Restorative means to set right the harm done. To do so, a person has to acknowledge and own his or her behavior, appreciate its effects, and repair the harm caused to self and others. In the classroom or school community, RD supports our intention to teach what we want students to learn rather than what we don’t want them to do.

RD is a guided collaborative effort that improves personal accountability and self-responsibility. It helps students stop blaming others or holding them in disregard. There’s another benefit. As we know, some student behaviors hit our moral compasses and push our reactive retaliation buttons. RD helps teachers from becoming reactive to student behaviors.

There are a number of ways to apply RJ principles in practice. Two that I have found effective are the restorative inquiry process coupled with apology of action. In this process, students recognize, acknowledge, appreciate, and repair the wrongful action.

Restorative inquiry focuses on “what” not “why,” who was harmed and how can you make it right. Apology of Action is the “make it right” part of the process.

A typical classroom scenario unfolds as such:

Teacher: Why did you do that?

Student: I didn’t do anything. He did it.

Teacher: Don’t say you didn’t do it. I saw you throw the paper at him.

Student: There you go again. Always blaming me when I didn’t do anything. He started it!

And so it goes in a circle until the problem worsens and the original issue gets lost among the words.

The Restorative Inquiry Conference stops the madness! Approach the conference with compassion and kindness. Resist any inclination to interrogate. To stay focused on the issue, take notes that the student can also see. Thoughts on paper reduce anxiety and maintain focus.

Conferences with students use three guiding questions:

Begin with the fact pattern. What happened? How did it happen? What part did you play? This process works best when students understand that the purpose is not to punish or blame but to correct and move on. In my experience, at the outset of the conference, many students generally attempt to shift the focus away from ownership by blaming conditions or another. Don't go down that road. Stick to the fact pattern and don't debate. Here you can use the neutral "notice and name." For example:

Teacher: I noticed that....

Student: So and so did....

Teacher: Right now, this is our conference, just you and me.

Move to empathetic questions, such as "How did it affect you?" and "How did it affect the other person(s)?" By beginning with "How did it affect you?" you are opening an opportunity for the student to see that you care about them more than the broken rule. Empathetic questions allow a relaxing of defenses and encourage personal reflection. The information gathered from this step shapes the next step.

Conclude with reflective and action-oriented questions, such as "What can you do to make it right?" or "How can you repair the harm done?" or "What will help you to fix this situation?"

Initially, many students will give themselves typical punishments such as detention. Don't let the process stop there. The point is to find the action that will repair the harm done.

Finding a way to right or repair harm involves brainstorming ideas that move beyond a simple "I'm sorry." Inviting the harmed party to be a part of the brainstorming helps with conflict resolution and relationship repairing.

If an apology of word or deed is the solution, how will it be heartfelt, meaningful, and lead to change? When making an apology, the student may incorporate an acknowledgment of what s/he did and ask the harmed party what would make it right. Having all parties involved resolves conflict and repairs relationship. In cases where both parties have been harmed, both can agree upon the next steps.

What future action can you take? Put the suggested future action into a written agreement. It is a building block for future responsibility taking that provides the student with a concrete, proactive, and pro-social behavior alternative. Cue or remind the student when needed.

The next step is to put the apology of action into motion. Set the terms—time, place, parties to be involved. Conclude by expressing appreciation for the effort the students have put into the practice.

Clearly, using this process takes some time especially when it is being newly implemented. Yet, I have performed conferences in a hallway with students immediately following the behavior. For cases in which a student has been removed from class or school, follow up with a restorative conference before the student comes back to class or shortly thereafter unless you know doing so at this time will kindle student reactivity. Have the conference when conditions support the effort.

How antidotes become preventatives

Rapport, relationship, and positive culture grow from a sense of safety, trust, constancy, and predictability, or what Erickson called cornerstones for development. The watermark embedded within these cornerstones is the notion of fairness. As my friend, author Rick Lavoie said, “Fair does not mean equal. Fair means getting what you need.”

The positive practices described above help students with behavioral challenges by being fair, individualized, and non-emotionally reactive. When positive behavioral supports, including CPS and RD practices, are the customary “rule” of the land, then the environment becomes safe, predictable, and positive. Student social emotional learning and decision making is supported. Inappropriate and defiant behaviors are hard pressed to grow in these highly cultivated conditions. Attempts to sabotage the positive climate simply put the student at risk for social isolation. Most students don’t want that.

“Be the change you want to see in the world,” said Gandhi. PBS redirects the spin into a pro-social direction.