

Teachers can be their own worst enemies, says Tom Bennett in the third of his four-part series on behaviour management

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You have woken up from the nightmare of your early teaching career. Your little Spartans now perform, more or less, as you expect them to, and you no longer worry that they will decide en masse to treat you like the Invisible Teacher. Good enough?

Wrong. No matter how long you've been cracking the whip, there's never an excuse for feeling like you know it all. And a common mistake for more experienced teachers is to assume that there is no more to learn.

Many teachers get to a level of reasonable classroom behaviour but then stop trying to improve, or worse, stick to what they know, even if that means bad habits. The danger is that they begin to see coping as an end point, rather than as a temporary strategy for enduring difficult times. Habits, once learnt, become routines that seem inevitable. How can you avoid them?

Accepting the unacceptable

Remember the things you always hated to see happen in a classroom when you were starting out? Pupils shouting; heads on the desk snoozing; nobody seeming to remember pens, pencils or manners; homework handed in only when the moon is full, that kind of thing. These were never things you wanted in your room, but my goodness you have them now. Is this just a price you have to pay for relative order?

Of course not. You didn't go into teaching because you wanted to teach half classes. My premise is that you are the single biggest factor in their participation and behaviour, and therefore you are responsible for behaviour, good and bad, that happens on your watch. Pupils talking over others, and shoddy homework is your responsibility too. You have somehow allowed it to happen.

Compare your original expectations of the class with your present ones. How different are the pictures? If one looks like a Disney cartoon and the other is like a surreal nightmare, then somewhere inside your head the idea of what you would accept has changed. Try closing your eyes in your class (perhaps not, on second thoughts), imagining how you want them to be; now reopen them (metaphorically) and notice what you can see that wasn't in your mental picture.

Now change it. Tackle it. Tell them to stop. Or start. Show them who is the boss and what the boss expects. Chances are it's been so long since you told them what the rules are, they've forgotten.

Are you teaching them to be bad?

Even if you tell them what you expect, is that all you've been doing? In communication, actions always trump words. Are you subconsciously telling them to behave badly?

Come on - no one would do that, surely? But they do, all the time. Every time a teacher sets homework with a deadline and fails to collect it on time, they're showing deadlines don't matter. If pupils talk over you and you do nothing, they've learnt that nothing will happen to them if they do so.

Eating in class? Rude to the teacher? Falling asleep? If you endure these things publicly, the children will have learnt something you never meant to teach them: bad habits. And if you think you're disciplining them by shouting at them, then think on. If pupils see the only trial they have to endure for talking is a quick verbal admonition then, from a strictly economical point of view, they might figure that it's worth

the fleeting discomfort it would cost them to mess about. If missed homework just means a 10-second ticking off, plenty of pupils will do the maths and take the licks, if it means saving an hour of research and writing at home.

So if they break the rules, look again at the way you issue sanctions. Do they have teeth? If the pain of breaking the rule is less than the pain of sticking to it, then your sanctions are too weak.

Making it up as you go along

“This isn’t me,” you cry. “I apply sanctions like the SAS. But they still act up.” The next question to ask is: “Do I apply my rules all the time, or just when I’ve got the energy?” Because if you let one pupil off with shouting out, but nail someone else because they’re closer, more annoying, less scary, or unlucky enough to catch you at the end of your tether, then you’re teaching them that sometimes they can get away with it.

When you have rules they have to stick, and that means making them as inevitable as the laws of physics. You have to create in their minds a sense of cause and effect that becomes so automatic that they come to expect sanctions following misbehaviour. That way they start to self-regulate. For the teacher squeamish about getting tough, this is the holy grail. Put the effort in on the small stuff, and the need to punish melts away as pupils realise the pleasure of behaving and learning in your class outweighs anything else. Make it make sense to them.

The best ways to sharpen your behaviour pencil

- Remember what you used to expect from your classes. Expect it again. The most powerful person in that room is you, unless you talk yourself out of it and hand the keys over to the pupils.
- Draw your line in the sand, make it clear what crossing it means, and then do what you said. Every time.
- Watch other teachers. See how they control their classes, and get them to explain it. They don’t do magic - they just act differently to other teachers. You can act the same.
- Be humble. Accept that you can still improve as a teacher and put yourself on behaviour management training courses or observation cycles. Film yourself teaching and watch what you do more than what you say. Ask yourself what you would think of yourself if you were your own pupil.

Crime and punishment

Every teacher has a range of punishments - but are they all used, or are some dished out more than others? Here are some of the most popular:

- Short verbal reprimand. Said seriously and publicly, this is your first port of call for most minor disruptions - make it clear with all your body what you mean.
- Sending a pupil out of the class. Make sure this is only five minutes or so, otherwise it becomes pointless and matters are unresolved.
- Detentions. The grand dame of sanctions, but make sure you turn up for them and if they don’t, always escalate.
- Phone calls home. Simple but devastating in most cases; try to get your call in before the pupil goes home, and never criticise the parents.
- Move them to another seat/taking away privileges.
- Meeting parents. Once the pupil sees school discipline as an extension of home discipline, huge progress

is possible.

- Screaming at the pupil in front of the class. If you ever do this then you deserve the pupils to kick off at you - and don't you dare discipline them for doing exactly what you're doing to them.

Tom Bennett is the head of religious studies and philosophy at Raine's Foundation School in Bethnal Green, east London.

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- Too much generalised opinions, and not enough in the way of practical advice. What about the practical approach before students even enter the room. Also, the teacher

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