

A recent Scottish Secondary Teachers Association survey reported their teachers experiencing increasing indiscipline in school. Much of this seems to be due to changes in society that are beyond the control of schools, but nonetheless teachers need strategies to help improve classroom discipline and buck the societal trend. It might be difficult for secondary teachers to be aware of each pupil's background and circumstances which may be the underlying cause of their poor behaviour, but an understanding of pupils' responses in school can help teachers select strategies to reduce bad behaviour and avoid its escalation.

Like teachers, most pupils want a working environment that they experience as safe, stimulating and respectful. This is all the more important when pupils may not be experiencing these factors at home or in society at large. If school seems unsafe they feel anxious, if it is not stimulating they get bored, if they feel disrespected they become resentful. Anxiety, boredom or resentment can provoke bad behaviour and indiscipline.

Safety

What does safety mean to a secondary school pupil? Firstly there is physical safety and freedom from bullying. Secondly there is the safety of firm boundaries and clear sanctions. Pupils want and need boundaries to know how far they can go; the constant pushing against them may look like they are disregarding boundaries, but it is more likely that pupils are checking that the boundaries are firmly in place.

Justice is the third thing that gives pupils a sense of safety. School rules need to be applied fairly and consistently; a frequently offending pupil can be outraged when he or she is caught doing something wrong, not because they didn't do it, but because they know others have done it too and got away with it. This can result in a pupil complaining of being 'picked on'.

Safety is also experienced in more subtle ways: feeling able to achieve what is being asked, feeling confident that the teacher can get you through your exams, feeling it is safe to make a mistake or ask for help or contribute to the lesson without risking humiliation. The anxiety caused by not wanting to appear stupid, or even too clever, in front of one's mates can lead to rudeness or fooling around to save face.

Stimulation

A lot of bad behaviour, especially low-level 'silly' behaviour, is a result of boredom or of the body's need to do something physical. Unfortunately this can result in a downward spiral: teachers are less likely to risk more exciting or active lessons with badly behaved pupils because they cannot be trusted to be responsible; humour is less likely to be used to lighten a lesson in case it gets out of hand; disruptive pupils are more likely to spend breaks in detention which means they and their teachers do not get the benefit of them having used up their excess energy outside the classroom.

Respect

According to Adrienne Katz, chief executive of Young Voice which has surveyed 4300 teenagers, their constant refrain was to be treated decently. What do teenagers mean by this? Interestingly, what pupils want from teachers is similar to what teachers want from pupils. Pupils want to be listened to, they do not want to be shouted at, they want to be spoken to in a calm and respectful way. They want a relationship with their teachers that includes humour and perhaps a bit of banter, but not the confusing sting of sarcasm.

I recently asked a seventeen year old what teachers should know about boys in order to understand them better. His reply was: "Boys need to be given space." He explained that when a boy is asked to do something he needs to be allowed a moment to decide for himself to do it. If not, he feels pressurised

and may react badly. He also needs to be given space to change his mind, and to save face. Another boy explained that if he or his friends are shouted at or spoken to in what seems a disrespectful way, he feels honour-bound to stand up against what he perceives to be an imbalance of power.

Strategies for Responding to Unwelcome Behaviour

Pupils need to know their teachers will not put up with bad behaviour; they should get the consistent message from the school: "We accept and respect you, but do not accept bad behaviour." Incidents should be dealt with firmly but with a light touch so they don't detract from the lesson or become more serious. Here are some strategies that might help.

1. Notice the positive

People behave well when they feel good about themselves. If you can catch pupils doing things right you can start a virtuous circle. Sometimes it's worth pretending to be deaf and blind to mild incursions, and relentlessly acknowledge the positive.

Instead of: "You've only written one paragraph."

Try: "It's good to see you've got started."

2. Channel energy

If poor behaviour is due to misplaced energy, you may need to go into an exercise which will divert that energy – two minutes comparing answers with a neighbour, moving into practical work more quickly than planned or doing a quick 'brain gym' exercise. I met a teacher who was driven mad by pupils tapping their pens on the desk, so he taught the whole class to twirl their pens silently instead.

3. Respond playfully

Humour can do wonders to defuse a situation. A grin, a twinkle in the eye and a playful response may do the trick.

Pupil: "It wasn't me!"

Teacher: "Nice try, but I saw you!"

Pupil: "For God's sake!"

Teacher: "Yes for his sake and for yours!"

4. Don't take things personally

Pupils sometimes say or do terrible things without thinking, because they are all wound up. It helps if the teacher can choose not to take these things personally.

Pupil: "It's crap here."

Teacher: "That's not good to hear. I'd like to know why you think that, but you'll need to explain to me without swearing."

Pupil: "Fuck off!"

Teacher: "I wish I could, but I've a lesson to teach. (*As an aside*) And I'm going to have to report you for that language."

5. Only ask questions when you need to know the answer.

Questions can exacerbate a situation; it may be more effective to make a statement.

Instead of: "Why are you late?" (Pupil: "That's none of your business!")

Try: "You're late, take a seat." or better still, say nothing, point to your watch and then to a seat.

If you do ask a question, choose one that can help resolve things.

Instead of: "Why did you do that?"

Try: "That's not like you. What's the matter?"

SUMMARY

Reduce poor behaviour caused by *anxiety* by making school *safe*

- Physical safety
- Freedom from bullying
- Firm boundaries and clear sanctions, consistently applied
- Perceived justice
- Alright to make mistakes and to ask for help

Reduce poor behaviour caused by *boredom* by making school *stimulating*

- Set challenging but achievable tasks
- Use humour to engage pupils
- Plan changes of activity
- Recognise the need for physical activity

Reduce poor behaviour caused by *resentment* by making school *respectful*

- Take a moment to assess what is going on before saying anything
- Remember you may not know the full story
- Use a calm and respectful tone of voice
- Avoid shouting
- Listen and acknowledge the pupil's point of view
- Take care with sarcasm
- Give space for the pupil to choose to cooperate
- Reprimand quietly or privately; allow pupils to save face

Strategies to reduce teacher stress in the classroom

- Don't take things personally
- Take the heat out of an incident by responding playfully
- Avoid being confrontational, it often makes things worse
- Look for and comment on what pupils are doing right
- Be relentlessly positive
- Smile and laugh as much as you can

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