

The background of the page is a blurred photograph. In the upper right, a bright red apple is visible. Below it, a wooden bowl with a light-colored rim is in focus. The rest of the background is out of focus, showing hints of other objects and colors.

# Tips for Handling Difficult and Disruptive Students

**LORMAN**<sup>®</sup>

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## Why Students Misbehave

Difficult students affect an entire classroom by preventing a productive atmosphere. Unfortunately, all educators will deal with dozens of disruptive students in their careers. The educator's initial approach with a disruptive student will often determine the course of the student's in-class actions.

Educators need to consider the factors that drive students to misbehave in order to effectively curb bad behavior. There are several schools of thought concerning misbehaving students, but most educators accept that all student behavior has a purpose and a cause.

There are several classes of difficult students. We can group them according to the response that they seek either from teachers, parents or other students:

- Power-seekers. Power-seekers are undoubtedly the most difficult group of difficult students for teachers and often draw numerous office referrals. These students want to control the classroom, so they often seek out conflict with teachers. Power-seekers may fundamentally mistrust authority figures, which makes teaching them quite difficult.

- Attention-seekers. Most educators are aware of certain students' desire for attention, which typically stems from a lack of attention at home or an inability to fit in with classmates. Attention-seekers are the most common type of difficult student.

- Revenge-seekers. These students act out in class to punish their teachers and fellow students for perceived unfair treatment, which might include poor grades, favoritism or other events. This group also includes students who feel that their teachers are unprepared or otherwise unfit to lead the classroom.

Apathetic or disinterested students are also difficult, but while their behavior affects classmates, this paper will focus on response-seeking students and ways to curb potentially disruptive behavior. When disinterested students misbehave, teachers can often help them by discussing goals and by showing confidence in their abilities.



## Avoiding Confrontations With Difficult Students

Educational professionals often make the mistake of challenging students in front of their peers, which reinforces bad behavior and almost inevitably leads to a confrontation.

Publicly admonishing a student for his or poor behavior is plainly ineffective. Regardless of whether a student is misbehaving for power or attention, embarrassing or confronting the student will invite a response.

Teachers should also avoid hollow or potentially misinformed accusations. Even if a misbehaving student is at fault, an accusation is not an effective solution.

Instead, the teacher should explain why the disruption is inappropriate for the other students in the classroom. Teachers can also deal with disruptive students using the following techniques:

- Quiet in-class correction. Teachers can quietly address a misbehaving student without drawing attention to the student. A simple "not now" is enough to quiet many attention-seekers, although power-seekers might see this action as a challenge. Teachers should stay stern and note the student's response. Speaking to a student after class can reinforce the message of an in-class correction, and a teacher can often stop ongoing problems with a revenge-seeking or attention-seeking student via this message.

- Positive reinforcement. Students often respond well to apparently random acts of kindness, particularly if they are seeking attention or acting out for revenge. Teachers need to actively look for reasons to complement a student, especially for good academic performance or positive

engagement in class discussion. Positive reinforcement can effectively disarm difficult students and gives the teacher more control over the classroom.

- One-on-one discussion after class. An after-class discussion can make a student less defensive. Students are often more reasonable during these discussions and may curb their behaviors if presented with a strict set of consequences. After-class discussions are an appropriate recourse for minor disruptions and can deescalate power-seeking or revenge-seeking students.

- Group rule determination. Teachers can win classroom support while curbing the influence of revenge-seeking difficult students by clearly explaining their rules at the beginning of the school year, and one way to do this is to allow the class to determine its rules for the school year. The teacher guides the class in a discussion of the rules, and the class decides appropriate punishments and rewards for following the rules. This establishes the purpose of class rules for many students and prevents all types of misbehaving students from negatively influencing their classmates. It is also another type of positive reinforcement.

- Administrator intervention. Occasionally, teachers may need an administrator's help to stop extremely difficult students from acting out. We will discuss valid and invalid reasons for administrator intervention towards the end of this paper.

## Different Techniques For Younger And Older Disruptive Students

All misbehaving students will generally respond to the techniques listed above, but teachers will need to use different approaches for younger and older students.

The study "Educational Sequelae of High School Misbehavior," written by Jeremy D Fish et al, examined the relationship between misbehavior and academic performance. Not surprisingly, disruptive students were more likely to fail classes and drop out of school early. About 33 percent of severely disruptive students dropped out before graduating high school. Low-level disruptive students had a much smaller dropout rate of about 6 percent.

The paper also showed a link between disruptive behavior early in a child's education and more frequent, severe behaviors in middle school and high school. It is therefore clear that educators can treat difficult students more effectively before disruptive behaviors have a chance to develop. Teachers must also use different techniques to correct behaviors in older and younger students.

Older disruptive students are often harder for educators to read. They might not respond to rewards, particularly if they are acting out because of a perceived need for revenge or power. They are generally more likely to start a confrontation with an educator. Their methods of disruption are also quite different and may include

tardiness, inappropriate suggestions and even threats of physical violence.

Conceptually, older students respond to the same techniques as younger students, but a teacher must show consistency and control in the classroom. The teacher cannot overreact to minor misbehavior or show favoritism of any kind, especially early in the school year. Teachers should not tolerate disruption of any kind in any classroom, but in an older classroom, minor disruptions will quickly grow into major issues.



## When To Rely On Administrators

"Educators should be willing to send disruptive students out of the classroom," said Andrew Carmitchel, an educational consultant and former school administrator. "Some difficult students will misbehave regardless of a teacher's actions, and the classroom will detect a weakness if the teacher isn't prepared to send this student on to a principal." Of course, administrators need to support their teachers. A good teacher-principal relationship makes

behavioral management a much easier process. From the teacher's perspective, the key to developing this relationship is knowing when to send students on to an administrator and when to deal with the problem in the classroom.

Teachers will need to send a student to an administrator for several reasons:

- A power-seeking student starts a confrontation. Power-seekers will rarely back down, so confronting them is in no way beneficial. An educator should calmly send a student out of the classroom if the student is obviously confrontational.
- The student threatens the teachers. Most school districts have strict guidelines for dealing with physical threats. Unfortunately, teachers with older students will likely experience physical threats during their careers, and they should notify an administrator immediately after the threat occurs.
- A revenge-seeking student stops recognizing the teacher's control of the classroom. A third party can help to correct a revenge-seeking student's behavior when the student will not stop disrupting class, regardless of the teacher's actions. However, teachers can stop most revenge-seeking behavior without an administrator's help.

Teachers should not send a student to an administrator without attempting to correct the behavior in class through one of the methods outlined above. Administrative intervention is a last resort, and while it has

its place, it is not the most effective tool for an educator.

Administrators should focus on de-escalation when dealing with difficult students. The initial meeting with a misbehaving student is especially important because the student is often tense, angry and emotional. Administrators who stay objective initially while deescalating the situation will have better chances of curbing the bad behavior by presenting the student with consequences. Once again, negative reinforcement is ineffective if the administrator fails to address the core issues behind the misbehavior.

### **Keeping Control In A Classroom**

Educators often have trouble exercising control over difficult students, but effectively handling these students is often as simple as recognizing the reasons for their misbehavior and avoiding emotional, negative responses. This is as true for administrators as it is for teachers, but in-classroom corrections carry the most weight with students.

By properly explaining their rules and looking for attention-seeking behaviors early in a school year, educators can develop a consistent approach that prevents the majority of classroom disruptions. All teachers will deal with disruptive students, but an engaged, thorough approach will help to minimize these distractions while promoting a better learning environment for all of the students in a classroom.

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