

E-4 Diversify responses to various degrees of misbehavior

When you're in the middle of instruction, you may encounter an assortment of misbehavior that varies in degrees of severity and warrants different types of responses. While in the moment, assess the degree of misbehavior and tailor your responses accordingly. Over time, also consider how to reflect on the underlying causes of misbehavior to increase the effectiveness of your solutions.

Minor Incidents

What are examples of minor incidents?

When students do not meet your behavioral expectations but are not exactly breaking the rules and may not deserve an 'official' consequence.

For example, behaviors like:

- unwittingly tapping a pencil
- humming during silent work
- staring out the window
- students playing with something in their hands
- snapping gum by accident, etc.

How do I respond to minor incidents?

When this happens, students still need to know that their behavior compromises learning for themselves or for others in the class. To prevent that interruption from escalating into behavior that does break a rule, alert students of your expectations by addressing the interruption immediately. Be sure to:

- Minimize your verbal response
- Don't interrupt the lesson flow
- Invest very little emotion

Sample techniques that show these guidelines in action

Important notes when considering the methods in the chart below:

- **The methods below are only effective when applied to minor interruptions.** If you use these same methods in response to a more serious interruption (e.g., derogatory comments, aggressive actions, etc.), your students may lose respect for you – perhaps feeling that you aren’t willing to be tough in order to ensure your students meet high expectations.
- **Keep in mind that using the same method repeatedly can minimize its effectiveness.** Use a variety of strategies over time. If minor interruptions begin to dominate your lessons, consider re-teaching or [reinforcing](#) classroom rules and procedures
- **Remember to [reflect on the causes of misbehavior](#) to tailor your response.** If Victor consistently drums his pencil on the desk, he may not be doing it unwittingly but rather as a tactic to get attention. While you would use the below strategies to deal with Victor’s behavior in the moment, you would also take long-term proactive steps, like those to help him channel his need for attention through more appropriate means.

Scenario: *It is sixth period on Tuesday. The lesson objective is to identify the components of poetry. Victor has just arrived from Physical Education where they played basketball for the whole period. Victor loves basketball, and he is hyped up from the minute he walks in the door. When you open the lesson with a poetry reading, Victor is rhythmically drumming his hands on the desk and looking around the classroom in a distracted manner.*

Method	Explanation of Method	The Method in Action
Physical Proximity	Be mobile. Movement communicates that you are focused on all parts of the room, and it can get a single student’s attention without interrupting the entire class. When a student is creating a minor interruption, immediately move closer to his or her seat.	You move closer to Victor’s seat so he knows that you heard his drumming and are aware of his distraction. While moving closer to Victor, you continue reading the poem and maintain the flow of the lesson. You remain by his desk for a short period of time before moving on.
Sudden Silence	When a student is disruptive while you are speaking, stop and wait for the disruption to cease.	Mid-stanza, you sharply pause your reading. After a few seconds Victor stops his drumming and you continue the poem.
The “Teacher Look” (a.k.a. the “We Are Not Amused Look”)	This is a more direct approach to address minor interruptions. When a student interrupts instruction, you lock eyes and communicate your displeasure with your facial expression. “The Look” doesn’t have to be angry, just serious, perhaps even just raised eyebrows. Be sure to acknowledge the student when they comply.	You look up from the poem and give Victor a direct look that clearly communicates your intentions. You maintain eye contact for a few seconds, smile and nod your head in thanks when Victor gestures his understanding. You then return to reading the poem.
Praise	Sometimes an effective response is to ignore the misbehavior and praise other students who are meeting behavioral expectations	You say “I like the way Tasheena is in active listening position, with her hands still and ready to learn.”

Method	Explanation of Method	The Method in Action
Physical Cues	Simple physical cues can communicate better than words without disturbing the lesson flow.	Without a significant pause in your reading, you look up, make eye contact with Victor and make a “calm down” gesture with your hand.
Post-It Notes	Some teachers carry a clipboard with pre-written Post-It notes that say “please focus on what we are doing now” or “please throw out your gum.” If a student needs a reminder about their behavior, they choose the appropriate note and place it on the student’s desk.	As you continue reading the poem, you walk by Victor and place the note that says, “please focus on what we are doing now” on his desk.
Individual Signals	Some students need an individual reminder when they are interrupting. Taking them aside and agreeing upon a method can be very effective.	While reading, you hold up one finger and make eye contact with Victor. Because you both agreed upon this signal in advance when Victor was disruptive in the past, Victor knows that he is creating a distraction and that one finger means he needs to stop what he is doing.
Touch	A quick touch on a shoulder or a student’s desk is often effective at curbing minor disruptions. Before touching your students, identify with whom this would work well and who would respond negatively.	You approach Victor’s seat while continuing to read the poem. As you pass him you tap him on the shoulder.
Quickly State Student’s Name	Stating a student’s name is effective if you feel that you need to immediately catch that student’s attention (but don’t overuse this technique - students quickly become immune to hearing their name called). This method is potentially more disruptive to the rest of the class than most other interventions mentioned.	When Victor starts drumming on the desk, you immediately say “Victor” and make eye contact with him.
Ignoring	There are specific situations when you may believe that a student is acting out to get attention. You may choose to ignore this behavior if it is not creating a classroom disruption. This should be done carefully, because students may assume that you are not aware or do not care about the behavior. You would later raise the issue with the student in private.	

Misbehavior that violates rules

What are examples of misbehavior that violates rules?

Behavior that is more serious than minor interruptions and that clearly breaks the established rules in your class.

For example:

- Refusing to follow directions
- Talking back
- Making derogatory comments toward others
- Talking at inappropriate times or about inappropriate topics
- Being dishonest

How do I respond?

- Use your behavior management plans for responding to breaches to your expectations (P-5)
- Implement your consequences (like issuing a warning, writing a name on the board, changing a student's behavioral card, giving a behavioral reflection form, etc.)
- If a student continues to break rules (or if multiple students break rules), consider [reinforcing your behavioral expectations](#)
- If students continually fail to meet expectations or respond to your consequences, [reflect on the causes of misbehavior](#) to help identify more effective solutions over time.

Severe Incidents

What are severe incidents of misbehavior?

Situations that jeopardize student safety, such as students physically fighting or overt threats of physical violence

How do I respond?

As much as anyone can, you should prepare for these major incidents. In order to respond calmly and effectively to serious situations take the following steps:

Fighting

1. **Find out your school policy for reacting to violent behavior.** Most likely, your school has a handbook that describes at least a basic procedure for a teacher's response in the case of a fight or other emergency. Pay particular attention to the steps for notifying the school administration in the case of an

emergency in your classroom (many classrooms have an “emergency button” that connects you to the main office via the PA). Work with your administration to clearly determine your course of action.

2. **Seek the advice of veteran teachers** regarding the best course of action in the case of a major incident. They might be able to share stories or events that have occurred and ways in which they responded.
3. **Think through how you might handle situations such as a fight ahead of time.**
 - a. **Consider what you would do and to whom you would turn** if students began to fight or their behavior became out of control.
 - b. **Develop a plan** to help put you at ease, and, more importantly, allow you to act in a more decisive manner if a serious situation does occur in your classroom.
 - c. **Don’t feel the need to respond gradually**, even if your general consequences utilize a gradual approach; you’ll recall that effective consequences include a “serious offense” clause that allows the teacher to take any step necessary to defuse the situation.
 - d. **Remain calm** - remember that anger, excessive panic, or unnecessary volume on your part will only exacerbate the situation.
 - e. **First use your voice to intervene.** Use a strong, calm, clear voice and direct the fighters to stop fighting. Repeat this message, like a broken record. While you are doing so ...
 - f. **Send another child to get help from other adults**
 - g. **Weigh the risks of injury to the students and to yourself and decide to break up the fight.** If you are significantly larger and stronger than the students in the altercation, and it is not in direct violation of school policies to do so, you should try to separate the students rather than allow either child to get seriously injured. If you are smaller or weaker than the students, it may be better for you to wait for help. Knowing the policies of your school, knowing your students, and thinking through the response with which you are comfortable will allow you to act decisively in the heat of the moment.

Threats of violence

It is also possible that as a teacher you will find yourself having to respond to a potential *threat* of violence. As a teacher, you might hear a rumor that a student has a knife or gun in school or that a student is high or under the influence of alcohol. If you hear such a rumor, take it seriously:

- **Keep the student within sight (if he or she is in your classroom) while immediately sending for help.**
- Ideally, **know your school’s plan for responding** to threats of violence.
- If there is not a plan, **speak with experienced staff and/or an administrator ahead of time** to learn what you should do in such a circumstance.

Note:

As former Attorney General Janet Reno explained in the *2000 Report on School Safety*, “Physical fights and the presence of weapons at school are dangerous, and they are also highly disruptive to the learning environment. Contrary to public perception, however, both weapon-carrying by students and physical fighting have declined steadily in recent years.”¹ For most teachers, these issues rarely, if ever, arise. At the same time, the reality is that all teachers must be vigilant about fighting, weapons, and threats in school.

¹ U.S. Departments of Education and Justice. *2000 Annual Report on School Safety*. Washington, DC, 2000, p. 6.