

Responding to Misbehavior

Chapter Four

- I. Reflecting on the Causes of Misbehavior
- II. Responding to Minor Interruptions
- III. Implementing Consequences Effectively
- IV. Major Incidents

Introduction

The previous chapters of this text have addressed various foundational components of a classroom culture of achievement. Establishing rules, consequences, and routines encourages and supports the excellent behavior necessary to effect significant academic gains with your students.

This chapter will discuss the components of your classroom management that are of a more corrective nature – those methods by which you will assert your authority and apply consequences when a student does not meet your high expectations for behavior. Sometimes, due to a variety of factors ranging from the teacher’s lesson pacing to how a classmate goaded them in the hallway, a student will choose to break a rule and receive the consequence. Other times, the student won’t act out in frustration or pain but will still disrupt their own or the class’s learning – for example by rhythmically tapping her pencil and humming during silent independent work, or by passing a note to her friend two rows over. In both cases, you must respond to these disruptions in order to maintain the classroom community and culture that you have worked relentlessly to build. Ultimately, you want your students to see misbehavior as a disruption to their learning. Students in Maurice Rabb’s (Los Angeles ’99) class responded with, “Does that help us learn to read and write?” when a classmate misbehaved.

We will first take a careful look at factors that cause misbehavior. If a teacher understands the roots of student interruptions and poor behavioral choices, that teacher is more likely to respond calmly and not take the misbehavior personally. That teacher also has the emotional distance to help students understand how their behavior affects their learning and the learning of their classmates and to reflect on what steps they could take to prevent student misbehavior in the future. With that foundation, we will discuss how to respond to student behavior that may not break a rule but still interrupts the learning environment of your classroom, along with best practices for implementing consequences when a student does choose to break a rule. Finally, we will discuss particularly challenging situations that you should think through carefully before the school year begins.

I. Reflecting on the Causes of Misbehavior

In every case, your search for the impetus for misbehavior should start by examining your own decisions and actions. Quite frequently, teachers discover that the plans they’ve created, the rules they’ve crafted (or failed to craft) or the comments they make to students may be the very things working against them.

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Lesson planning. While this is by no means always the case, incidents of disruptive or off-task behavior are often tied to a weakness in our own planning and design of the lesson itself. Students *will* become disengaged – and then off task – if they are sitting at their desks simply watching Anthony complete the math problem on the board during the guided practice stage of your lesson. Students who finish an independent activity and don't have anything else to work on *will* find “other things” to occupy their attention. When you plan, you should ask yourself not just, “What will I be doing every minute of the class?” but more importantly, “What will *my students* be doing every minute of the day?” In this sense, the interconnectedness of the *Instructional Planning & Delivery* text with the *Classroom Management & Culture* text cannot be overstated.

My number one classroom management strategy was solid and tight lesson planning. I found that students who are engaged in a lesson and have specific goals they are working toward have a lot less time to be distracted and get off-task.

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As you master the art and science of lesson planning, you improve your ability to design lessons that decrease the risk of off-task behavior that often leads to disruptive behavior. For example, perhaps you want your students to practice multiplying fractions. Your first thought is to have two or three students at a time come to the chalkboard to practice those problems. Your second thought is, “Well, that’s not a bad idea, but what are the thirty other students going to be doing at that time?” Not only would having only three students at a time engaged at the board be an inefficient means of instructing thirty-plus students, but having thirty disengaged students is clearly an incubator for disruptive behavior. To head off this problem, you change your plan. You go to a home-and-garden store and purchase a large sheet of dry erase board, which can be easily cut to create miniature whiteboards for each child. You hand out dry-erase markers and paper towels, and each student completes the problem in big numbers. All the students then hold up their boards for you to see when your timer dings. With that adjustment to your lesson plan, you have greatly increased the effectiveness and efficiency of your lesson and greatly decreased the likelihood of disruptive behavior.

Student boredom. Boredom can arise for a number of reasons – and can result in a student going to sleep or being disruptive. First, the student could be under-challenged academically. Do not discount the notion that your biggest “troublemakers” may actually know (or at least *think* they know) the material before you teach it. Second, students might not be engaged with the lesson, because they are not invested in the academic goals, because the lesson is beyond their academic abilities, or because the pacing of the lesson is too slow. The chapter on Differentiation in the *Instructional Planning & Delivery* text will give you specific strategies for challenging all levels of learners. Also, strive to engage all students at all points in the lesson (perhaps by sprinkling students’ names throughout the introduction of new material and guided practice, and by making sure all students are involved in all aspects of the lesson cycle). Of course, lesson planning alone *does not* guarantee that a lesson will pass without disruption. However, a poorly planned lesson *does* virtually guarantee off-task or disruptive behavior.

After examining whether student misbehavior could stem from your own instructional delivery, examine other potential contributors to off-task and disruptive behavior. The following are some other common teacher-created “causes” of misbehavior in classrooms:¹⁵

¹⁵ This section is adapted from Curwin, Richard and Allen Mendler. *Discipline with Dignity*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1988.

When I first started teaching, my classroom was an implicit heaven. I would ask, beg and plead with my students to do something – “Can you please sit down now? Will you get out your reading books?” It wasn’t working for me, and my students got frustrated with me because I was getting frustrated with them. I didn’t realize the root of my problem until I videotaped my classroom and saw the unclear and implicit nature of my language for myself. From there, I was able to change how I spoke by giving my students concise and direct actions they could follow.

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Unclear limits. You may be shocked to hear that D’Andre, your third-period angel, shouts out answers constantly in another teacher’s room (a teacher, who, incidentally, does not think it is important to expect students to raise their hands to speak during a class discussion). When you see your fourth-period class sitting like adults when they are with Ms. Clay during the school assembly, you may realize you need to establish and reinforce clearer expectations for when they come to you during fifth period. Students cannot violate rules that have not been established, and they will “code-switch” from classroom to classroom depending on the limits that have – or have not – been established for them. You must inform students of your standards of acceptable behavior upfront; remember that establishing rules and procedures is a form of *preventive* discipline.

Students should also learn that real limits to behavior exist by seeing consequences applied each and every time a rule is broken. Avoid ignoring infractions by some students but then punishing others when they break the very same rule. Catch and deliver consequences for the first offense, immediately, to prevent more serious offenses from taking place.

A sense of powerlessness. Students may act out as a way to demonstrate their sense of frustration and powerlessness if they believe that your rules are arbitrary and unfair. Therefore, be sure that classroom rules and procedures are necessary, and that the rationale behind each rule is explained to the students both up front and as the consequences for misbehavior are implemented. A procedure that requires fifth graders to move through the classroom like first year naval academy students (you know, turning at sharp right angles) or a rule such as “complete all assignments in blue ink or receive a zero” will only serve to frustrate students and instigate misbehavior. An anecdote in the book *Starting Small: Teaching Tolerance in Preschool and the Early Grades*, asserts that:

Students must know what is expected of them. Period. They cannot be successful in a classroom where they don’t know what the rules are, or where they cannot rely on the systems through which the rules are enforced. Not understanding expectations is frustrating and makes students feel powerless, which leads to acting out.

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...blind obedience is not the goal. “Last week, a child came up to me and said, ‘If this is a free world, why do we have rules?’ I thought it was a very good question. I asked him to tell me a rule that he didn’t understand, and he said, ‘Running. I don’t know why we can’t run.’ I said, ‘You can run – outside,’ and he said, ‘But not in school.’ So we acted out what would happen in certain situations if you ran instead of walked. And then it made sense.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Teaching Tolerance. *Starting Small: Teaching Tolerance in Preschool and the Early Grades*. Southern Poverty Law Center, 1997, p. 66.

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Attacks on dignity. It may be difficult for you to detect this problem on your own, but your tone and choice of words may unintentionally hurt students. You must never compromise the dignity of a student, even when he or she is misbehaving. Address student behaviors (“Roselyn, you need to face forward in your chair and focus on your reading”), not the students themselves (“Roselyn, don’t be such a pest. Can’t you see you’re annoying Joe and everyone else around you when you turn around in your seat?”). By dwelling on negative characteristics, you are not only suggesting that there is something inherently wrong with the student, but you are also inviting a power struggle (“Joe doesn’t think I’m annoying him”) or retribution (more on this in the upcoming *Power and Revenge-Seeking* sections).

You might also unintentionally attack the dignity of your students by belittling the personal forces outside of class that may contribute to their behavior. If a student has fallen asleep during your lesson, making a comment such as “this isn’t kindergarten nap time” as you shake the student awake is an unnecessary gibe. A student’s sleepiness, which may be the result of a host of real-world circumstances, merits your attention and assistance, but not your ridicule.

Upholding student dignity applies to academic work as well. When you grade papers, do you simply put the grade on the top and hand it back to the class? Imagine being the student who consistently receives tests back with failing grades written in big red letters. If the teacher simply moved on to the next chapter in the textbook, without encouraging or working with you one-on-one, you’d begin to feel that you were unable to be successful, particularly if the knowledge in the class is cumulative. You might shut down or explode in frustration (more on this in the upcoming *Avoidance of Failure* section). It is critical that teachers create classrooms in which *all* students can succeed, in which all students can define themselves as people with positive contributions to make, as we will discuss in chapters five and six of this text.

It will be important to reflect regularly on your students’ behavior and the root causes of that behavior. This reflection not only helps prevent you from taking the misbehavior personally, becoming emotionally affected yourself and responding recklessly, but it also sheds light on steps you should take to adjust your approach to prevent misbehavior in the future.

To that end, educator Linda Albert has developed a classroom management philosophy called *Cooperative Discipline* to help teachers differentiate their response to student misbehavior, depending on the source of the problem. In her book, Albert outlines four causes of misbehavior:

- Attention-seeking
- Power-seeking
- Revenge-seeking
- Avoidance of failure

I feel the most useful component in creating a respectful tone in my classroom is to never humiliate a student – no matter what he/she just did or said. They need time to step back, cool off, and analyze their actions. I have a desk set off to the side, out of the view of most students, for a kid to go and calm down. When I find a break in my instruction, I go speak with the student quietly and privately about what happened. Rather than putting students in a confrontational situation, I give them the power to comment on how they acted first.

Jennifer Cecil, South Louisiana ‘03
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The hardest thing in dealing with student misbehavior is realizing that it’s rarely directed toward you as an individual. Rather, it is usually a reaction to frustration of some kind. Catalog the disruption and reflect at a later time. You’ll find that you are better able to diagnose what the root cause of the misbehavior is – is it a classroom issue, something the student is bringing from home, or a combination?

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When addressing misbehavior, Albert says the first step is to determine the cause motivating a student in a particular situation. To do this, she suggests that teachers first gauge their own emotional responses to the incident, arguing that a teacher’s response can often signal the cause of the student’s misbehavior. We know if Joan is seeking our attention, for example, if we give attention to her. We would not ordinarily walk over to Ralph, who is working quietly, if Joan is whistling. Similarly, if we get furious with Peter and want to punish him severely, it’s probably because he has demonstrated vengeful behavior and we have found ourselves wishing to retaliate back. By gauging how *we* feel about what the student has done, Albert indicates that we can determine why the student might have done it.

Once a teacher has pinpointed the goal of the misbehavior, he or she can use strategies over time to help students find positive outlets for the needs they had been trying to fulfill through distracting or destructive means. The chart below outlines a description of each of these misbehaviors in action, a way for teachers to use their own responses to identify the cause, and some ways to address the needs that lie underneath the situation.

Attention-Seeking

<i>What this looks like.</i> Constantly waving their hands to participate, whining for help, or entertaining the class.	
<i>A teacher’s typical reaction.</i> Mild. We feel irritated and annoyed. Typically, we acquiesce and give them the attention they want (even if it’s negative attention), and they stop—for a while.	<i>Strategies to address the need.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catch them being good, giving attention for positive reasons (“Thanks for cleaning up, Puck, because that really saves me time.”) • Teach them to ask for attention (“Benvolio, let’s come up with a special signal that you can use to show me you would like my attention.”) • Set up times to give students your attention (“Helena, I’d love to hear more about your weekend during a lunch date tomorrow.”)
<i>The student’s legitimate need.</i> Students need to feel valued and affirmed. In younger grades, students may crave an adult’s attention, whereas an older student’s target audience may be peers.	

Power-Seeking

<i>What this looks like.</i> Students who verbalize or suggest with body language, “I won’t do what you say! You can’t make me!”	
<i>A teacher’s typical reaction.</i> Hot. We feel angry, frustrated and fearful of losing control. Our natural inclination may be to fight with the student (and, in so doing, engage in an unproductive struggle for power ourselves), or give up.	<i>Strategies to address the need.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow voice and choice (“Propose some alternatives to the assignment after class, Beatrice, and we can talk through them.”) • Delegate responsibility (“Iago, will you help operate the audiovisual equipment for the class today?”) • Acknowledge legitimate power (“You’re right, Cordelia. I can’t force you to do anything you don’t want to. But you will have to accept the consequences of your decision.”)
<i>The student’s legitimate need.</i> Students need to feel in control, autonomous and free to be individuals.	

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Revenge-Seeking

<i>What this looks like.</i> Attacking you or others verbally or physically, or vandalizing school property.	
<i>A teacher's typical reaction.</i> Boiling. We feel hurt, disappointment or even dislike toward the child. Our gut response may lead us to lash back at them or punish them harshly, thereby exerting revenge on them ourselves!	<i>Strategies to address the need.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build caring relationships (“Claudio, what’s really upsetting you?”) • Teach appropriate expression of feelings through the use of puppet shows or drawings, as well as I-statements, community meetings and problem-solving protocols (“In today’s journal assignment, we’re going to spend a few minutes writing about a time when we were really angry at someone.”) • Discuss misbehavior later (“Hamlet, we’ll talk about this after class so we don’t waste everyone’s learning time”). • Allow students to save face by ignoring a rebellious mutter like “I’m leaving when the bell rings” rather than replying, “Oh no, you’re not!” • Take charge of our own negative emotions (“Class, I wanted to apologize for raising my voice yesterday. That is no way to resolve a problem.”)
<i>The student's legitimate need.</i> Children need an outlet for feelings of hurt, and they may want to protect themselves from future pain.	

Avoidance of Failure

<i>What this looks like.</i> Procrastinating or not finishing work. Regularly asking to visit the nurse or bathroom.	
<i>A teacher's typical reaction.</i> We feel professional concern, despair and self-doubt about our abilities to reach the student. Our natural response may be to feel like a failure ourselves, giving up or referring the child to a counselor who we hope will “fix” the problem.	<i>Strategies to address the need.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage an “I can” ethic (“Gertrude, look at your portfolio and see the progress you’ve made in punctuation with your careful practice!”) • Foster friendships and build confidence (“Oberon, will you please quietly explain the Do Now procedure to Titania while the rest of us begin?”) • Lower the stress level (“We’re going to practice our presentations with a partner before doing it in front of the class.”)
<i>The student's legitimate need.</i> They don’t think they can live up to your expectations. They don’t want to be seen as unsuccessful.	

Many of the strategies that Albert recommends can fall under what she calls the A’s: attention, affirmation and affection. She points out that it is often difficult to give the A’s to students who are the most challenging in the class, because they may not seem to “deserve” them or even want them. Albert argues that the A’s are human needs that students who are misbehaving may especially crave.

Sometimes, misbehavior occurs when a student has an emotional disability and requires more support in learning to control her behavior and develop self-discipline. The next section will discuss how to respond to students who need additional behavior support.

Differentiated Behavior Management

Some students, particularly some students with behavior-related disabilities, will need more formalized support in learning to manage their behavior. Individual behavior contracts allow you to construct a specific set of expectations, consequences, and rewards for students with whom the regular classroom system is not working. A sample behavior contract is in the **Classroom Management & Culture Toolkit** (p. 34), found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖ Consider the reflection of Sara Cotner (South Louisiana ’00):

One of my third grade students had bi-polar disorder and was notorious for destructive and disrespectful behavior the year before she entered my class. Her behavior was so

severe, in fact, that she had to be institutionalized for several weeks at a time. I introduced an individualized behavior modification plan. It was a simple table with our daily schedule, and she earned stars in the boxes for good behavior. If she misbehaved, I would record the behavior exactly, and her grandmother signed the sheet each night. The student would receive a certificate for earning a certain number of stars in a day. When she collected enough certificates, she could trade them in for time on the computer. After three weeks of this individualized system, she no longer needed it. She responded very favorably to the class-wide positive reinforcement system.

In some cases, you will need to access additional help from one or more of your fellow teachers or administrators. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that for any student who needs extra behavioral support, the IEP team (those who help create and monitor a student's Individualized Education Plan) must conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) as well. An FBA involves a school-based team implementing a behavior intervention plan that includes positive behavioral interventions and supports for a student with behavior disabilities.

The underlying assumption of the FBA is that every behavior is serving a function, whether it's to get attention, escape tasks, obtain objects, alleviate boredom, or any number of purposes. A comprehensive assessment of a student's behavior and the social, emotional, cognitive, and environmental factors associated with the behavior should reveal the behavior's function. While the FBA process can be done in a variety of ways, the following example presents a simplified version of the four steps usually involved in the process:

- 1. Clearly define the problem behaviors(s):** Jason gets out of his desk and walks around the room. While walking around the room, he often taps on other students' desks.
- 2. Identify events, times, settings, and situations that predict when the behaviors *will* and *will not* occur:** Jason does this in social studies, language arts, and science. He does not do this in math, art, or health.
- 3. Gather data on possible causes of misbehavior (What is the student "getting" out of misbehaving? What the function of the misbehavior?):** After several observations and interviews with Jason, his teachers, and his parents, it seems that the function of the misbehavior is task avoidance. He seems to exhibit the behavior most frequently when asked to do something that involves writing.
- 4. Develop and test a hypothesis:** The hypothesis is that Jason has difficulty with writing and misbehaves as a way to avoid it. To test the hypothesis, his teachers planned activities that did not involve writing and observed and charted Jason's behavior for a couple days. He did not get out of his seat and walk around the room. To be sure their hypothesis was correct, they then incorporated writing back into their plans and observed that the misbehavior started again.

One outcome of an FBA is an understanding of why a student misbehaves, but the more important outcome should be a behavior intervention plan developed specifically for the student; one that is based on the results of the FBA. In Jason's case, a plan was developed that included individualizing his writing assignments, teaching him how to ask for help when he needed it, allowing him to use a computer for longer writing assignments, giving him the opportunity to take breaks during writing assignments, and a contract that included rewards for staying in his seat and consequences for getting out of his seat. Function-based behavior support allows teachers to individualize, or differentiate, based on a particular student's needs. The behavior intervention plan should include positive strategies and, in many cases, skill-building interventions. Sometimes students do not have the appropriate *skills* to exhibit appropriate behavior in some contexts, so these skills must be *taught*.

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The plan may also involve changes in the student's routine; when a student's problem behavior is predictable, changes in the student's routine can make it less likely that the problem behavior will occur. For example, Moninda blurts out a lot during class, especially in her afternoon classes. Since she takes medication for ADHD, her teachers meet with her parents to find out if there have been changes in her medical treatment. Her parents inform you that she no longer takes her medication because it was making her tired. As a solution, her parents may want to take her back to her physician, but they may not. The solution may be as simple as a schedule change where Moninda takes her academic subjects in the morning and PE, art, and life skills in the afternoon. Once the plan is in place, it is very important for the team to monitor, evaluate, and adjust as necessary. A sample "Functional Behavior Assessment" can be found in the **Classroom Management & Culture Toolkit** (pp. 35-36), available online at the Resource Exchange on TFA.Net. ✖

Outside Factors That Can Produce Student Misbehavior

In many cases, you will be able to affect the causes of misbehavior through adjusting your lessons, consistently and respectfully upholding reasonable limits, helping students express their feelings appropriately, or supporting improved behavior in a more formalized way. However, there are some rare situations or phenomena that are simply beyond your immediate control, or perhaps even your immediate understanding.

You may be teaching students for whom violence has been a tragic and deeply affecting part of their lives. Childhood trauma includes experiences that go beyond normal life stressors; these experiences can be physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; neglect; parental alcohol or drug abuse; death in the family; witnessing violence; frequent changes in primary caregivers; and physical injury. As a classroom teacher, it is important to be aware of what behavior problems could be manifestations of trauma:

- **Hurting others without seeming to care** can be a sign of overwhelming pain and suffering on the part of the misbehaving student. Children and youth who have suffered serious pain can shut down their feelings and lose touch with their sense of empathy.
- **Aggressiveness beyond what is typical** in the students you teach is highly correlated with being victimized by abuse or witnessing the abuse of another family member.
- **Deliberately annoying others** can be a sign of a student's sense of helplessness, also common when a student is accustomed to being abused or neglected.
- **Hypervigilance**, or a tendency to always be on the lookout for potential dangers, can also be a sign of exposure to an unexpected traumatic event.
- **Jumpiness or hyperactivity** can be a sign of trauma, as well as a sign of a disorder such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).
- Finally, **unusual spaciness** can be a sign both of a physical disorder, as well as a detached state resulting from being overwhelmed by a traumatic experience.

However, it is important not to assume that an unusually spacey student has experienced a traumatic incident – they might be distracted by the upcoming school dance. An aggressive child simply might require help channeling her energy and strength, and a child who exhibits annoying behavior might need more positive reinforcement for good behavior. We do not give these examples to minimize your vigilance, but only to remind you to analyze student's behaviors critically. And, although many students bring symptoms of the stress of their world to the classroom, this does not mean that these students cannot achieve academically or behave appropriately in your classroom.

There are many things you can do to have a profound, positive impact on a child who is a victim of trauma without devoting your full attention to that student or assuming the role of a therapist. Traumatized children, perhaps more than other students, benefit from structure, routines, positive empowerment, and positive attention – all practices you should be implementing as an effective classroom teacher

regardless of who fills your class. You have the opportunity and responsibility to provide all of your students with an environment that is safe, and in which they can experience success.

That said, some students would benefit from attention and intervention beyond the scope of what you can provide as a classroom teacher, and childhood trauma is one cause of student misbehavior that requires extra attention. If you have attempted to handle a particular student's misbehavior with consistency, persistence, reflection and revised strategies, and the behavior persists, perhaps something else in the life of that student must be addressed. Set up a meeting with the student and the school counselor. If journal entries, bruises, welts, cuts, or statements made by the child lead you to suspect that he or she has been a victim of trauma, or is currently being victimized, it may be your *legal obligation* to seek outside intervention, perhaps with the help of the school counselor, nurse, or principal. Available resources will depend upon your school and community and will likely not be as readily available as you would hope. However, they exist. As a classroom teacher who sees your students regularly, you may be the school representative best positioned to observe the signs of distress, and you can do a great service to students by helping them access the support and services they need.

Ideally, examining the array of "causes" for student misbehavior will allow you to react to inappropriate behavior without a strong emotional response from yourself. As the next two sections demonstrate, teachers must maintain a calm, firm, respectful demeanor when responding to both minor and more serious student interruptions.

II. Responding to Minor Interruptions

A student rhythmically taps her pencil during silent independent work. Another child is trying to take notes on your lecture while simultaneously finishing his homework for another class. A third is mouthing something to a friend across the room while you are trying to give directions. When students do not meet your behavioral expectations, and yet are not exactly breaking the rules, those 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, you must address the interruption immediately. When doing so, you should utilize the following guidelines:

- Minimize your verbal response
- Do not interrupt the lesson flow
- Invest very little emotion

Let's look at specific examples of addressing a minor interruption to see how those guidelines apply to the host of methods you could employ.

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.

Several of my more dominant students did not respond well to directly, publicly reminding them to follow the rules. To protect their pride and keep attention focused on my instruction, rather than the behavior, I began finding ways to whisper them reminders, at a natural pause in my instruction. This approach conveys a tone of respect, especially to the "leader" personalities.

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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.
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.
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.
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.	

These methods are effective only when applied to minor interruptions. Behaviors like unwittingly tapping a pencil, humming during silent work, or snapping gum by accident are not malicious infractions or insubordination, and using the aforementioned techniques to alert students to their behavior can remind them of your expectations.

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. Also keep in mind that using the same method repeatedly can minimize its effectiveness. If minor interruptions begin to dominate your lessons, take that as a signal that you need to re-develop or re-teach classroom rules and procedures. Remember, too, about the causes of misbehavior we discussed earlier. 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 above strategies to deal with Victor's behavior in the moment, you would also take long-term proactive steps, like those suggested by Linda Albert in *Cooperative Discipline*, to help him channel his need for attention through more appropriate means.

III. Implementing Consequences Effectively

Wouldn't it be nice if simply telling students your consequences and showing them the benefits of following your rules were enough to deter each student from ever breaking them? As we discussed in the opening section of this chapter, there are several reasons why students sometimes still break rules despite all our efforts to prevent misbehavior. And, a positive, achievement-oriented classroom culture does not spring forth by virtue of the teacher simply presenting the rules on the first day of classes, but develops over the long-haul, in part by faithfully and effectively implementing consequences for those rules. Here, we will discuss how to effectively implement a consequence when misbehavior does occur, as hesitation to do so is one of the fastest ways to undermine your own authority in the classroom. There are three keys to successfully implementing consequences:

- Provide students with control over the outcome
- Implement consequences consistently
- Implement consequences respectfully

These three principles, in the long-term, forge the most direct path to creating a classroom culture that incessantly drives academic achievement. Let's consider each in more detail.

Provide Students with Control over the Outcome

It is important to communicate to your students that they are in charge of the outcome of their behavior. They can choose to follow the rules (thereby receiving at least intangible benefits) or to break the rules and incur the consequences. Many corps members have utilized the following concrete strategies to reinforce this to students:

- Signs in your classroom, such as one above your consequences chart that reads, "If you CHOOSE to break a rule..." or "Look here to see how we have CHOSEN to behave"
- Language that repeatedly conveys the choice at hand, such as:
 - "I was so impressed by your choice to peacefully resolve that conflict with Tatiana. That was extremely mature of you."
 - "Chris, since you chose to get up and walk around the room without asking for permission, please go and flip your card to yellow."

Responding to Misbehavior

- “Jessica, I already gave you a warning for turning around and talking to Juan during the warm-up. Since you chose to continue that behavior, you will now be required to remain in the room during hallway time. I’m putting your initials on the board as a reminder.”

Another way to ensure students feel a sense of control and hope is to give them a “clean slate” after the consequence is over. Some corps members, especially at the elementary level, start their series of consequences over each day or halfway through the day (for example, putting each student back to “green” on the traffic light after they have served the consequence for moving to red). Secondary corps members, who usually see their students for an hour each day, allow students to return to the bottom rung of the consequences ladder for a fresh start every Monday.

I learned very quickly that if I was not consistent in reinforcing rules and consequences, the students would sense a weakness and would exploit it. I always attempt to make sure that whether it is the most difficult child or the most angelic, the consequence remained the same. It protects you and your authority in the long run.

Elisha Rothschild, North Carolina '01
Youth Director
Beth Israel Congregation

Implement Consequences Consistently

Very often, when a group of students does not meet behavior expectations, it is because the teacher has failed to consistently enforce them. A common example revolves around expectations for raising your hand to speak during a class discussion. If a teacher sometimes responds to students who call out, despite an explicit rule about hand-raising, most students will begin to ignore the rule, and may be genuinely surprised or frustrated when the teacher later disciplines them for calling out. Vigilant consistency will pay off in the long run; when consequences appear random, students begin to feel powerless and doubt that they can influence their own outcomes.

A huge turning point in my teaching was that epiphany I had in my first year of teaching when I realized that I could have a much more powerful effect on my students' behavioral choices when I spoke to them in a neutral tone, instead of in a condemning fashion when they in fact made poor choices. Speaking to my students this way helped them to realize that when they didn't meet a classroom expectation, it wasn't simply about "breaking a rule": it was about making a choice that either hurt themselves or others in the classroom. It took the focus off of me as a teacher, and on them as a student, and what they could do to make better choices in the future.

Charlotte Phillips, Houston '01
Director, Alumni Affairs
Teach For America

Once a child has developed a pattern of misbehavior, you may find yourself watching that student particularly carefully, looking for him or her to act up. You may even be tempted to send him or her out of your classroom the very first chance you get, rather than following your ladder of consequences, to get the child out of your hair. Check yourself on these impulses. What message are you sending a child when you consistently throw her out of your room? Once you start eyeing certain students with suspicion even before they've done anything wrong that day, you've exploded the power of high expectations. Kids can smell mistrust a mile away and may even play the role you've cast for them. For children who are weighing whether to follow the rules, it may not be worth trying to behave if your teacher simply expects you to be bad.

Implement Consequences Respectfully

While it is important to assert your authority consistently when students misbehave, it is equally important to address misbehavior in a way that allows students to maintain their dignity. First, you must be aware of your tone. Everything should be said in a firm and calm, rather than hostile and confrontational, tone. Another tip is to keep your language as descriptive as possible and to minimize the degree to which you make judgmental statements. Descriptive language verbally *portrays* a situation, behavior, achievement, or feeling. For example, you turn to Linda, who has just interrupted Faye while she is speaking, and say “I cannot concentrate on what Faye is saying while you are talking. We will discuss this further in our after-class conference.”

Judgmental language, which is often full of negative emotion, verbally *labels* behavior, achievement, or a person. Notice the difference: You turn to Linda, who has just interrupted Faye while she was speaking, and snarl, “Don’t be so rude! We’ll be discussing your poor manners after class.”

Descriptive language focuses everyone on the learning task and specific situation, and avoids labeling particular students as “smart,” “slow,” “well-behaved,” or “problem students.” In other words, you address the behavior, not the student. In situations in which a student misbehaves, descriptive language allows you to assert your authority while maintaining a positive relationship with the misbehaving student.

Let’s see how the three keys to successful implementation of consequences play out in the following scenarios:

Student Behavior	Your Response
<p>During silent independent work, Nicole turns around and says something to Kia. Kia simply shakes her head and continues to work. You catch Nicole’s eye and write her initials on the board, signifying a warning. Ten minutes later, Nicole is turned around in her seat again, talking audibly to Kia.</p>	<p>“Nicole, because you chose to turn around and talk to Kia after my warning, you have chosen to stay after class for three minutes once everyone else leaves to explain what is preventing you from focusing.”</p>
<p>Later, Kia turns to her left and says something to Miwa.</p>	<p>You write Kia’s initials on the board.</p>
<p>You notice Chris stealthily eating chips during your explanation of how to solve a second order equation.</p>	<p>Once students are working independently on solving the equations you have written on the board, you walk over to Chris and quietly say, “Chris, because you chose to eat those chips in class you’ll need to stay after school so we can strategize about how to keep you from getting hungry during class.”</p>
<p>You are walking the class down the hallway to the library. You turn around and watch as Jenny lags behind the line, stopping to wave at friends in Mr. Farr’s class and do a little dance in front of Ms. Baker’s class.</p>	<p>“Jenny, please get back in line and plan to speak with me when we arrive at the library.” Once there, you speak to her individually. “Because you chose to play in the hallway on the way to the library instead of walking quietly in the line, you have chosen to write a letter of apology to the teachers whose classes you have disrupted with your antics. I expect you to deliver a letter to Mr. Farr and Ms. Baker by 3:30 today. While in the library, I know you will make better behavioral choices.”</p>
<p>During a whole group discussion, James answers a question. After James gives his response, Curtis mutters, “What a fag.” The other students near Curtis laugh.</p>	<p>“I am shocked that you would use such a hurtful word and that others would laugh. Hurtful words, and laughing about their use, damage our goal of making this classroom a space where everyone feels welcome. The word Curtis used, “fag,” is a hurtful word that refers to gay people. We need to stop what we’re doing. I’d like each of you to write a page in your journal that explains a time someone used a word that hurt you. Then we will read some out loud...”</p> <p>Some students complain and say, “I didn’t say any bad words.” You respond, “that’s excellent. This assignment should be very easy for you – you already know how hurtful language can be.”</p>
<p>During small group reading time, Dexter throws his book on the floor and exclaims, “This book is so DUMB! Why do I have to read it?”</p>	<p>You move Dexter’s clothespin to the yellow light and say, “Dexter, it sounds like you need a cooling off period. We don’t treat school materials like that. Please pick up your book and put it on the table, and then move to the timeout chair and fill out a behavior reflection form. I’ll be over in a moment to discuss your frustration with you.”</p>

Responding to Misbehavior

These scenarios demonstrate consistent and respectful administration of consequences. If you find that Nicole is constantly turning around and talking to Kia, you will want to work with her to get at the root of the problem – and to involve her in that process. When she stays after class, you might have a conversation like the following:

- Teacher:** Nicole, I've noticed that in the past few weeks you've had a particularly hard time staying quiet when you are supposed to be doing independent work. Today you repeatedly turned to talk to Kia. Last week I remember you talking to Stanley. I'd like to understand why this is happening.
- Student:** Well, I guess I just like to talk. My grandmother always tells me I talk too much. And today I had something I needed to tell Kia.
- Teacher:** I see. Was it something that you could have told her during hallway time?
- Student:** Yeah, I guess.
- Teacher:** Ok, so how can we help you stay focused during the class period?
- Student:** I don't know. (teacher waits) I guess...well, with Kia right behind me it's really tempting to talk to her. Maybe if I sat farther away from her, and couldn't even see her, it would be easier for me.
- Teacher:** So looking at the seats in the classroom, there are empty ones here and here. This one would put you far away from Kia. You can move to this seat as of tomorrow.

In the situation with Dexter above, you should seek to understand Dexter's frustration with the book. Again, rather than just being punitive, you want to have a solution-oriented approach to student misbehavior. "Empathetic listening" requires teachers to avoid taking student complaints personally (as we are often tempted to do) and instead focus on "hearing the intent and emotions behind what another says and reflecting them back by paraphrasing."¹⁷ That conference might go as follows:

- Teacher:** You said the book was really dumb and seemed pretty frustrated that you had to read it. (*teacher paraphrases the student's statement*)
- Student:** Yeah. I hate it.
- Teacher:** You sound like you're not enjoying the book at all, Dexter. (*again, paraphrasing*)
- Student:** I'm not. I can't keep track of what is happening in it. And I have to stop every two sentences to look up all these stupid words. I hate it!
- Teacher:** It's difficult to understand, and that bothers you. (*paraphrasing once again*)
- Student:** Yeah, and I'd rather read a book about aliens anyway. That's what I want to do my book report on.
- Teacher:** Well, there are a few other books in our class library that are about aliens. Let's see if we can find one that won't have as many frustrating vocabulary words.

Remember, the ultimate purpose of your rules and consequences is to help your students meet your high expectations for behavior, which in turn will allow you to meet your goals for academic achievement. If you find that you are implementing consequences more than you are reinforcing excellent behavior, you may need to reflect on whether your consequences are purely punitive and not solution oriented. For "Questions to Consider When Consequences Don't Work," see the **Classroom Management & Culture Toolkit** (p. 37), found online at the Resource Exchange on TFA.Net. ✖

¹⁷ Woolfolk, Anita. *Educational Psychology*. New York, NY: Allyn & Bacon, 2001, 466.

IV. Major Incidents

Situations that jeopardize student safety, such as students physically fighting, a student having a medical emergency, a student being overtly physically threatened, or an honest-to-goodness fire may (but probably will not) arise in your classroom or school. As much as anyone can, you should prepare for these major incidents. In order to respond calmly and effectively to serious situations, we suggest taking the following steps:

1. Find out your school policy for various emergencies. Most likely, your school has a handbook that describes at least a basic procedure for a teacher's response in the case of a fire, intruder, 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).
2. You should also 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. If possible, you should review students' medical records to see if any have specific health issues, such as serious allergies to chocolate, bee stings or a history of seizures. If medical records are not available to teachers, consider asking parents to contact you regarding any medical conditions at the beginning of the year, or add such a question to a Parent/Guardian Survey.
4. Finally, think through how you might handle situations such as a medical emergency, fire, student fight, or intruder ahead of time. Consider what you would do and to whom you would turn if a student suddenly collapsed in your presence, or what steps you would take if a small fire started in your classroom. We do not mention these situations to frighten anyone; however, if you do not have children of your own, you probably have never thought of some of these scenarios before. Having a plan should help to put you at ease, and, more importantly, allow you to act in a more decisive manner if a serious situation did occur in your classroom.

Teaching and Personal Safety

Threats to physical safety do happen on school campuses, including those campuses where corps members work. By discussing the possibility of school violence and teachers' personal safety, we do not mean to feed the stereotypes propagated by television and the media. Your school will most certainly be, first and foremost, a community of students, teachers, and families, working together against a number of social ills that affect all communities, not just theirs. Still, vigilance about physical safety is a component of many of your students' lives, and it should be a component of yours. All teachers in all schools should be concerned and vigilant about personal safety, for the sake of their students and themselves. While crime on school campuses remains very rare, and while no amount of preparation can guarantee any individual's safety, complacency about the possibility that you will need to respond to a dangerous situation can increase your risks of being in one.

We do not raise these issues to alarm anyone. Rather, we want to acknowledge that assaults and weapons are sometimes a part of some of our students' lives and communities. And, as a member of that community, there is the possibility – however remote – that you will encounter these issues yourself, even if only indirectly. We welcome your thoughts and concerns about personal safety. Also, for some safety tips for teachers and a list of safety resources on the Internet, see the **Classroom Management & Culture Toolkit** (pp. 38 & 40); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖

Because fights between students, while relatively rare, are probably the most common of the major incidents that could arise in your school or classroom, let's discuss possible responses now. First, because most schools have policies for this type of situation, you should work with your administration to clearly determine your course of action. You should also think through the specific aspects of your own response. Remember that in this scenario, your response does not need to be gradual, 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.

Responding to Misbehavior

There is no one precise protocol for handling a fight between students. In most cases you have other options besides physically intervening with the students. When students are fighting, you should 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, send another child to get help from other adults. Remember that anger, excessive panic, or unnecessary volume on your part will only exacerbate the situation. However, it is also possible that you will 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.

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, your school will have a plan set up for such an incident specifically addressing who will confront the student. If not, speak with experienced staff and/or an administrator ahead of time to learn what you should do in such a circumstance.

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.”¹⁸ 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.

Building a Culture of Achievement

Taking Control For Learning’s Sake

High school math teacher Diana Percival (New Jersey '02) had trouble responding to misbehavior appropriately during her first semester of teaching. If a student would yell for something across the room, Diana would respond with equal volume, resulting in a shouting match between teacher and student. When she gave students detention based on a progression of consequences that was unclear even to her, her students would protest until she gave in. One day, Diana spent a lot of time and energy creating a math lesson involving colored cubes, which her students proceeded to fling across the room. She describes how she felt that day:

For the past three months, I had been completely overwhelmed with paper work, grading, and calling parents. I was exhausted from coming home and working on lesson plans – usually for the next day. I was bitter that I spent so much time, tears, money, and effort for students that were disrespectful towards me.

After speaking with colleagues and friends, Diana rethought her approach. She waited until the class was completely silent before proceeding with directions. She made an official seating chart. She responded calmly to classroom disturbances. She tracked her students’ inappropriate behavior using a clipboard and followed through on her consequences. She also praised students who did what they were supposed to do, and she developed P.R.I.D.E (Personal Responsibility in Demanding Excellence) Reports for each student, where she marked down when students came to class on time, participated appropriately and acted respectfully. Diana had realized that, in order for her students to take her class seriously, she would need to take maintaining her own rules and systems seriously. Once she did, they did.

¹⁸ U.S. Departments of Education and Justice. *2000 Annual Report on School Safety*. Washington, DC, 2000, p. 6.

Conclusion and Key Concepts

- It is critical that you **reflect on the causes of misbehavior**. Consider that you might have done something to incite a student to act inappropriately. Perhaps a student is bored and is causing a disruption because of your poor lesson planning, or maybe the student is angry and causing a disturbance because of a sarcastic remark you made.
- You should also consider that the student may need **special support** in learning to control his or her behavior or express feelings; your student may be trying to fulfill needs that he or she does not know how to handle otherwise: the need for **attention, power, revenge** or an **avoidance of failure**.
- Inevitably, you will need to respond to **minor disruptions** that prevent the misbehaving student, and perhaps his or her classmates, from learning. You might respond to these often unintentional interruptions by using one or more of the following techniques: proximity, individual signals, the “post-it” note, physical cues, touch, ignoring, silence, and the “we are not amused look,” among others.
- You will also need **to implement consequences** when a student breaks a classroom rule. You must do so consistently and respectfully, providing the student with some control over the outcome and an opportunity to achieve a fresh start. You should also communicate to the student that his or her choice to violate the rules represents a perhaps unwitting choice to accept the consequences for breaking those rules, and that the ultimate consequence of misbehavior is interrupted learning.
- You should also consider your own plans for any **major incidents** that might arise in your classroom, whether due to student behavior or other outside factors.