

Developing Relationships with Difficult Students

Four simple strategies can help forge a positive teacher-student relationship.

By: Lori Rakes & Audra Parker



As Mary watched Ashleigh get off the bus, she knew it was going to be “that kind” of day. Ashleigh was mad and yelling in the faces of the other children. Mary watched her push her way through the hallway, mumbling loudly about how unfair and wrong the principal was. And this was only the first week of school.

Ashleigh was a little large for a typical fifth grader, with an attitude that matched the size of a sumo wrestler. Mary had encountered many students like Ashleigh in her 15 years as a teacher—loud, angry, seemingly uninterested in doing any work in school, lacking manners and social skills, and most of all, showing limited

respect for any type of authority.

Mary turned to her bag of tricks, the tried-and-true management approaches that had worked for most students in the past: sending them to another teacher’s room, using logical reasoning, instituting a reward system, using assertive discipline techniques, and sometimes just ignoring the issue (picking her battles).

For Ashleigh, however, if the strategies worked at all, it was only a short time before they were right back to where they started. Mary wanted to reach Ashleigh and other students who had challenging behaviors, and knew she couldn’t change the students—so she chose to change herself and the way she approached them.

Four Keys to Success

Turning their attention to four focus areas can help teachers manage the behaviors of all students—especially challenging students—and get them focused on learning:

1. Get to know the students.

A first step in getting to know students on a personal level is paying a visit to their former teachers and initiating a professional conversation about the students’ previous behavior patterns. This insight and feedback from past teachers can help current teachers better understand what makes the students tick so they can begin to build a relationship.

Trying to get to know and understand the interests and motivations of difficult students can take a lot of time and energy. Some strategies for getting to know students include:

- Give the students a simple inventory that asks them questions about themselves and their families. Ask who they spend most of their time with, what activities they do when not in school, what television shows they like to watch, and what their favorite foods are, where they like to go, and who they admire.
- When you know more about them based on their responses to the inventory and your conversations with former teachers, make a point every day to engage students in one-on-one conversations about something you know they are interested in. Walk beside them in the hall or cafeteria line, engage them in conversation at their desks or in the lunchroom. Get to know them on a non-academic level. Asking students about aspects of their lives outside school is a powerful way to communicate that they are important to you and you care about them.
- Create opportunities for the student to know you as a “real” person—someone who enjoys many of the same foods, TV shows, and activities. Share a little of yourself through your conversations and your instruction.

Getting to know the students helps you connect with them. After the connections are made, students will recognize that you value them as individuals. This authentic relationship will shape their behavior and your reactions.

2. Teach social and emotional skills.

Students' lack of social and emotional skills may be a cause of their disruptive behavior. We cannot assume that students will acquire these skills naturally or that their parents will teach them at home. Therefore, we have to be purposeful and explicit in teaching them. This will be no easy task because some students don't even seem to realize that their social and emotional skills are lacking.

In her October 2012 *Educational Leadership* article, "Chaos in Kindergarten," Jenna Bilmes describes these key social and emotional skills as falling into four categories: building adult-child relationships, belonging to a group, regulating themselves, and adapting "home" behaviors to fit classroom expectations.

A great way to teach social and emotional skills is to enlist the help of your colleagues in role playing various situations with you. One such scenario might begin with your colleague "accidentally" running into you in your classroom. The students don't realize that this is a "set up" as the two of you trade insults and then begin pushing each other. Then you freeze and look at the students. Ask them what they are thinking.

Use that moment to talk about the proper way to handle such a situation. Ask two students (two of the more difficult ones, of course) to role play how you should have handled that situation. Then think of other scenarios to role play. Even though the students won't be surprised anymore, they will love it and will learn from the modeled situations.

3. Don't be afraid to use humor.

If you can make your students laugh and sometimes even joke with you, you can develop a more positive relationship with them. Christopher Claus, Melanie Booth-Butterfield, and Rebecca Chory suggest in their 2012 *Communication Education* article, "The Relationship Between Instructor Misbehaviors and Student Antisocial Behavioral Alteration Techniques: The Roles of Instructor Attractiveness, Humor, and Relational Closeness," that appropriate humorous interaction is a productive communication strategy that may mediate the effects of other, less-productive communication behaviors.

Many times, humor can break the ice with difficult students and motivate them to respond in a positive way both socially and academically. For example, if a student consistently walks into class with headphones on, listening to or even singing to music, try to use some humor to get him to put his headphones away—without embarrassing him, of course. A key aspect of using humor is setting a positive tone with body language and facial expressions.

Teacher: Devon, who is the artist that does that song that you are singing?

Student: What? (Music is so loud that he can't hear you.)

Teacher: Devon, who is the artist that does that song that you are singing?

Devon: It's (smiling, pleased with himself that he really knows what he's talking about.)

Teacher: Well, you really should keep your day job and leave the singing to him.

Class starts giggling at this point.

Devon: OK. You got me, you got me. (Takes the headphones off and puts them away.)

The next day in the hallway, the teacher asks Devon if he has signed up for those singing lessons yet. The relationship begins.

Humor enables teachers to build relationships with their students in such a way that the students feel comfortable talking to them about a variety of issues—both academic and personal. It is a form of communication that helps to promote interpersonal relationships with students by encouraging them to laugh and use humor themselves.

4. Praise in public, correct in private.

Praise is a vital piece of the behavior management puzzle for challenging students. Correcting students in front of their peers can embarrass them, and they will likely lash out at the teacher, not necessarily because of what they are being corrected for, but how they are being corrected.

Public correction can lead to feelings of anger and resentment and can undo the positive relationship teachers have established with the student to that point. In their book *The Educator's Guide to Preventing and Solving Discipline Problems*, Mark and Christine Boynton share that when it is not possible to remove a student from the classroom, teachers should do their best to quietly correct the student out of full view of the others. There's no need to make an example of the student.

The Classroom Priority

So, did Mary's plan work? Much of Ashleigh's behavior was related to her desire for attention. So, as Mary got to know Ashleigh, she began finding something to gently tease her about. Ashleigh loved it! Ashleigh became friendlier towards Mary and the two were able to sit and talk about various aspects of Ashleigh's life. The more she learned and understood, the better able Mary was to help Ashleigh.

Mary knew she had reached Ashleigh when the student came to her one day upset about the pants she had worn to school that day. She was embarrassed and trusted Mary enough to ask her for help. This relationship carried over into the classroom, where Ashleigh was noticeably less disruptive and more engaged in classroom activities.

Was Ashleigh the perfect student every day? Of course not! No plan works with 100% of the students 100% of the time. But strategies that develop positive teacher-student relationships should be a priority in every middle grades classroom.

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—Jen

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