

How Disruptive Students Escalate Hostility and Disorder—and How Teachers Can Avoid It

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Managing unruly behavior is one of the most difficult, frustrating, and even frightening parts of being a teacher. Intervening when children are young with evidence-based programs is the "Gold Standard" for preventing, or at least greatly reducing, disruptive behavior. Ideally, chronically disruptive students should be placed in high-quality alternative education settings where they can receive long-term, intensive interventions. Meanwhile, the reality is that teachers face such behavior regularly, especially from older students, and they need strategies they can start using today. In this article, our authors look closely at the moments before a volatile student becomes totally unmanageable and suggest how to defuse the situation.

With these high-need students, no behavior management strategy is going to work all of the time—but some are more effective than others. None of these strategies will turn an antisocial student into an angel, but they will give you a much better chance of completing your day's lessons.

—EDITORS

A teacher, Ms. Smith, instructs her class to take out their reading books and begin writing definitions of key words for the story on pages 25–33. The class begins organizing for the assignment—except Mike, who sits sulking at his desk. Ms. Smith approaches Mike and the following exchange occurs:

Ms. Smith: "Mike, I told the class to get ready for the assignment, but you aren't. Is there something the matter?" (Mike ignores Ms. Smith's question and avoids eye contact with her.)

Ms. Smith: "Mike, I asked you a question, Now *what's* the problem here?"

Mike: "There ain't no problem here, except you! I don't want to do this dumb work. Leave me alone."

Ms. Smith (now angry): "If you're going to be in my class, you will have to do your work like everyone else. Also, when I speak to you, I expect an answer. I don't like your attitude and I will not tolerate it in my classroom. You better watch yourself or you'll be in the office." (This is not the first exchange of this type between Mike and Ms. Smith. Both carry residual anger from these prior episodes.)

Mike (laughs sarcastically): "Get off my case! I don't give a damn about you or this stupid class. Go ahead and write me up!"

Ms. Smith tells Mike to leave the room and report to the vice principal. Mike goes ballistic, calls the teacher an obscene name, and pounds the wall as he strides out of the room. He continues to curse loudly as he leaves the classroom. Ms. Smith writes up the incident as insubordination and submits her report to the principal's office.

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Teachers, as well as parents and peers, are often inadvertently trapped in escalating, negative social interactions like the one above. These interactions are extremely disruptive to the learning environment and damaging to interpersonal relationships. Such behavior, if not brought under control, can also trigger a broader group of students to behave in disruptive ways.

Defiant, aggressive students like Mike (who are generally referred to with the clinical term "antisocial") are often highly agitated and bring to school a history of noncompliance with parents' instructions and commands (Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey, 1995). Their pattern of oppositional behavior (more fully described in the previous article) can be triggered by seemingly innocuous requests and instructions given by teachers throughout the school day (Colvin and Sugai, 1989). At school, these students are perceived as touchy; often they "train" the social environment to handle them with kid gloves. This posturing behavior pattern allows them to escape or avoid many reasonable requests made by teachers, peers, and parents.

Inevitably, even the kid gloves fail to keep antisocial students calm and engaged in their schoolwork. What to do? In this article we review some of what are known to be the most—and least—effective teacher responses to these students' provocative behavior.

I. Ineffective Reactions to Bad Behavior

Having rarely been taught the best strategies for dealing with antisocial students, teachers typically try a number of techniques in a desperate attempt to control the students' behavior. Most of these techniques, unfortunately, are of limited effectiveness—some may even fuel the bad behaviors of concern. Examples of teacher strategies that can fuel and strengthen problem behaviors are reprimanding, arguing, escalating hostile interactions, and attempting to force compliance. These approaches are fruitless in dealing with antisocial students because they come to school well versed in the "science" of coercion, having had extensive practice at home. When teachers issue an instruction with which these students do not want to comply, they escalate their noncompliance to higher and higher intensity levels until the instruction is withdrawn.

This is called the behavior escalation game and it is a game teachers cannot win and should not play (Walker, 1995).

Take a second look at the interaction between Ms. Smith and Mike, as it characterizes the behavior escalation game. This aversive process between the teacher and student occurs in thousands of classrooms daily, disrupting the classroom ecology and damaging teacher-student relationships. Teachers who respond "normally" to such situations (i.e., by engaging in the escalation), usually end up on the losing side of the confrontation. Walker (1995) has noted that this sort of escalating interaction progresses as follows:

1. The student is sitting in class in a highly agitated state, which may or may not be noticeable.
2. The teacher assigns a task or gives a direction to the student, either individually or to a group of which the student is a member.
3. The student refuses to engage in the requested task.
4. The teacher confronts the student about his or her refusal.
5. The student questions, argues with, and/or defies the teacher.
6. The teacher reprimands the student and demands compliance.
7. The student explodes and confronts the teacher, and the situation escalates out of control.

This scenario is played out in front of roughly 30 or more very interested observers (i.e., classmates). If the student "wins" the escalation game and forces the teacher to concede, then the teacher's ability to manage the classroom may be severely damaged. Other students may lose respect for the teacher and may resent the fact that a single student, rather than the teacher, can essentially control the classroom. In contrast, if the teacher "wins" and is successful in establishing his or her authority over the student, this victory is likely to be short-lived and prove to be very costly in the long run. The student may feel humiliated in front of his or her peers and will likely harbor feelings of long-term resentment toward the teacher. Typically, these students find ways to "get even" with the teacher. Thus, the teacher may "win the battle," but end up "losing the war."

To better understand why teachers' normal reactions to aggressive and defiant behavior are not highly effective, we'll begin by looking at three of the most common reactions: giving attention to the misbehavior, ignoring it, and escalating commands to the offender. Next, we'll offer strategies that teachers can use to avoid and escape hostile

interactions with students. And lastly, we'll discuss the best way to deliver directions to antisocial students.

Giving Attention

Generally, teachers are very alike in their approaches to managing antisocial behavior. Most often, they respond in ways designed to persuade or encourage the acting-out child to stop disrupting the class and to behave more appropriately. But in fact, both the positive social attention from peers (e.g., laughing at the jokes that interrupt a lesson) and the negative social attention from teachers (e.g., telling the student to be quiet) function to fuel the inappropriate behavior—making it much more likely in the future. Ironically, the teacher's direct effort to stop the student from engaging in acting-out behavior is the very thing that strengthens and maintains it.

Teachers typically respond rapidly to an antisocial student's inappropriate behavior because it disrupts the classroom ecology and is highly aversive. Teachers' efforts to manage problem behaviors are almost always directed toward making the student stop the inappropriate behavior as soon as possible. But their success in accomplishing this goal varies considerably (see Walker, 1995).

The antisocial student learns that it is much easier and more efficient to obtain peer and teacher attention by engaging in disruptive, noncompliant behavior than by completing work, following classroom rules, and/or developing friendships with peers. The antisocial student acquires a repertoire of disruptive behaviors and adopts tactics that force teachers and peers to respond to these highly aversive behaviors, often in a negative way. Even though the teacher's social attention is often negative, critical, and disapproving, it still functions to maintain the problem behavior. Many acting-out students appear to thrive on the hostile confrontations they have with teachers; their ability to confront, irritate, and otherwise make life miserable for their teachers is rewarding.

Ignoring

Sometimes, teachers attempt to control the acting-out, disruptive behaviors of students by simply ignoring them. This strategy is based on the mistaken notion that the inappropriate behavior is maintained exclusively by teacher attention. This response is typically ineffective for at least three reasons. First, the attention students receive from peers (positive or negative) provides a huge amount of reinforcement for the student's bad behavior. So teachers who ignore behavior that is maintained primarily by peer social attention will have no impact.

Second, teachers understandably find it almost impossible to ignore seriously disruptive behavior for any length of time because antisocial students escalate their demands for attention. Theoretically, if all reinforcement (by teachers and peers) is continually

withheld, then the behavior will eventually stop, but total extinction can take a very long time. In reality, teachers will eventually have to respond to highly escalating behaviors, which then reinforces and strengthens the escalation.

Third, in some cases the student does not use his behavior to gain attention, but to avoid academic tasks in the classroom. If the student's escalation is serving this function, then simply ignoring the problem behavior will not be effective response.

Escalating Commands

One of the most common mistakes that teachers make in trying to control the inappropriate behavior of antisocial children is the use of escalating commands or reprimands. Examples include statements such as: "You will do what I say," "You won't talk to me that way," or "I told you to begin work now!" Sometimes, these techniques will result in a temporary reduction in inappropriate behavior; other times, they will produce no noticeable effect on behavior.

Studies of classroom interactions have shown that teachers tend to fall into a pattern of paying extra attention to chronically disruptive children's bad behavior and very little attention to their good behavior (even though teachers do pay attention to the good behavior of nondisruptive children). Specifically, researchers have found that (1) interactions with generally disruptive students are more likely to be negative than positive; (2) the teacher is much more likely to reprimand the disruptive children's inappropriate behavior than to praise their appropriate behavior; and (3) disruptive children tend to monopolize the teacher's time (Mayer & Sulzer-Azaroff, 2002). Falling into a negative pattern of interacting is understandable given the children's aversive behavior. But it means that many opportunities to reinforce good behavior are lost. And, over time, disruptive children perceive that they are treated in a more critical way than others.

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Clearly, hostile teacher-student interactions are frustrating for teachers who have to deal with antisocial students. Frequently, the harder the teacher tries to control the student's behavior, the less effective these efforts are. This process can be physically and emotionally draining. In the next section, we illustrate principles and procedures for managing student agitation. This information provides extremely valuable ammunition to teachers in avoiding, escaping from, and terminating angry interactions that often damage teacher-student relationships, waste teaching time, and threaten the teacher's ability to control the classroom.

II. Managing Hostile Interactions

What should teachers do to keep agitated students from erupting? The key strategy is for teachers to get out of these escalating interactions as quickly as possible. Of course, it is not always clear when students are in the agitated state that is a precursor to behavior escalation—teachers can get drawn into the early stages of behavioral escalation before they realize what is happening. But as soon as they realize that the student is agitated, teachers can use the following *avoidance* and *escape* strategies.

Avoidance

An important concept in dealing with escalating behavior cycles is to "pick your battles" and to know when to leave students alone. If an antisocial student does not immediately engage in an assignment, it is often best to wait and give him or her leeway (i.e., the benefit of the doubt). These students quite often engage in delaying tactics as a way of (1) provoking teachers (and parents), (2) engaging them in negative interactions, and (3) asserting their control and independence in certain situations.

The teacher who forces compliance with a direction in a rigid, prescribed timeframe will find that this strategy seldom produces a good result with antisocial students. Waiting for a reasonable period of time (and ignoring the student's passive noncompliance) is often a reasonable alternative to direct confrontation. Many times, the students will engage in the assigned task if left alone and given sufficient time. It is vital, however, that the teacher not reinforce students' delaying tactics by either reprimanding them or showing signs of irritation and disapproval. Such teacher behavior will fuel rather than deflate the students' bad behaviors; students often are reinforced by "getting a rise" out of the teacher.

If it is obvious that a student is not going to engage in the assigned task and seeks to wait the teacher out, the teacher will have to address the situation. In so doing, the teacher obviously does not want to communicate that the antisocial student does not have to play by the same rules as the rest of the class. In these cases, the teacher should approach the student quietly and inquire as to why he or she is not engaging in the assigned task. The teacher should speak in a low voice, remain calm, and try to keep the situation as private as possible. If the student begins to escalate by arguing or questioning, the teacher should *immediately* disengage and state something like the following: "If you need some time to yourself, go ahead and take it. You can sit quietly as long as you do not bother other students. Let me know if you need some help with the assignment or have questions."

The teacher should leave the student alone and allow him or her to deal with the situation without further assistance. In this way, it becomes the student's responsibility to cope with the situation. But the teacher should also make it abundantly clear that the

student must complete the assigned task (either now or later) and that lost time will have to be made up. Neither the student nor his or her classmates should be left with the impression that delaying tactics will result in a reduction of assigned work. Walker (1995) suggests that teachers using this strategy ought to communicate the following to the student:

- The student can't take control of the situation by arguing with the teacher or asking provocative questions. As long as the teacher is willing to answer such questions or argue, the student, not the teacher, is in control of the situation. This is a trap that must be avoided *at all costs*. In most cases, it leads to a worsening situation.
- When the student is ready to work, the teacher will be there to provide any assistance and support required.
- The student will not be able to reduce the assigned work by showing signs of agitation, sulking, or using delaying tactics.
- The student will not be able to provoke or anger the teacher through verbal or physical means (e.g., being unresponsive, sulking, or arguing).

Escape

Inadvertently, teachers often find themselves in an escalating situation by simply answering questions, providing assistance, or clarifying instructions. As soon as a teacher realizes what the student is doing, she should escape the interaction and disengage with the student. A typical example of escaping is as follows:

Ms. Smith: "Mike, you had a question about the assignment?"

Mike: "I don't have a clue what you want me to do." (Ms. Smith repeats the directions given to the class for the assignment.)

Ms. Smith: "Does that help? Do you understand what I want you to do now?"

Mike: "I guess, but I'm not going to do it because it's too hard for me. You know I hate math!"

Ms. Smith (realizing she's about to get trapped): "Mike, I have explained the assignment to you. You know what you have to do and your job is to do it. If you want help, I'll give it to you. You have 15 minutes left to complete the assignment." (Ms. Smith disengages and walks away from Mike's desk. Mike sulks for a while and gradually becomes more and more agitated. He raises his hand and Ms. Smith approaches the desk.)

Ms. Smith: "Yes, Mike?"

Mike begins to hassle Ms. Smith about the assignment and how his parents think it is unreasonable. Ms. Smith says nothing to Mike in response and simply walks away. Mike

goes ballistic, throws his math book across the room, and curses. Ms. Smith sends Mike to the principal's office on a discipline referral.

An interaction that ends with sending a student to the front office may not seem like a success. But escaping, no matter how the student reacts, is always a better bet than arguing with or reprimanding the student in an attempt to force compliance. Arguing or reasoning with Mike in his current emotional state would have gained nothing. In fact, it would have made the situation much worse. It is likely that Mike would have become extremely aggressive with the teacher had she issued escalating prompts and attempted to force Mike to comply. Escaping terminates the hostile interaction as quickly as possible, thereby doing minimal damage to the relationship between the teacher and the student and preserving teaching time.

Escaping is also a safe strategy. It is never a good idea to allow teacher-student interactions to escalate out of control, particularly when students are older, more mature, and physically stronger than many teachers. Juvenile courts frequently place adjudicated youth in schools without informing teachers and administrators of their backgrounds. These students often have histories of assault and have committed other serious crimes. As such, escalating social interactions with these students often carry considerable risks to teachers and peers.

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Angry, escalating episodes that teachers must avoid or escape are almost always precipitated by teachers delivering directions. Antisocial children tend to perceive adult directives as provocations rather than reasonable requests and are masterful at resisting them. Note, however, that by calibrating the nature and timing of directions, teachers can reduce the chances that the directions will be seen as provocative. The following section reviews some critical issues related to teacher directives and provides guidelines for the delivery and use of this important technique for teaching and managing groups of students in the classroom and other settings.

III. Delivering Directions

Researchers have classified two major types of directions that adults give to children: alpha commands and beta commands (Williams and Forehand, 1984). Alpha commands involve clear, direct, and specific instructions to students without additional verbalizations, and they allow a reasonable period of time for a response. In contrast, beta commands are vague and/or contain multiple directives; either way, they do not provide a clear criterion for compliance or sufficient opportunity to comply. Beta commands also include excess verbalizations from the person issuing the command. As a result, the student receiving the beta command has no opportunity to comply and is

often confused. From preschool through grade 12, alpha commands are associated with higher levels of compliance than beta commands. Beta commands should be avoided whenever possible.

The use of alpha commands has a long history in the military. Training in military leadership strongly emphasizes the use of clear, specific, and forceful commands to prevent misunderstanding and to increase compliance. The following are some examples of alpha commands:

"Matt, I want you to pick up your room as soon as you finish dinner."

"Luke, tell me what time you have to be at baseball practice today."

"Merilee, go see the vice principal right now about yesterday's absence."

The following are some examples of beta commands:

"Matt, your room is always such a mess! Why don't you clean it up instead of waiting for me to do it for you? I get so tired of always picking up after you!"

"Lisa, stop talking to Laura unless you are discussing today's assignment. Besides, you are only supposed to be talking if you've finished all your work!"

"Mike, it's time for you to get to work. So get to it and don't let me catch you loafing again or you'll have to stay in for recess!"

When students do not comply with commands (alpha or beta), it's natural for teachers to then make demands in an attempt to force compliance. But with antisocial students, demands have a good chance of resulting in defiance. Defiance can be explosive, sometimes violent, and, as has been noted, often highly damaging to the teacher-student relationship. Instead of giving in to the temptation to make demands, teachers should consider the following guidelines in giving commands to maximize their effectiveness and to manage the classroom more efficiently (Walker, 1995). The teacher should:

- Use only as many commands as needed in order to teach and manage the classroom effectively. Research has shown that rates of noncompliance increase as the number of commands increases (Walker, 1995).
- Try to limit the number of *terminating* commands given in favor of *initiating* commands. Terminating commands direct the student to stop doing something inappropriate (e.g., "Don, stop talking to Frank right now!"). Initiating commands direct the student to start doing something positive or productive (e.g., "Mike, read this passage out of your book aloud to the class").

- Give only one command at a time. If a series of separate tasks is involved, give distinct commands for each task.
- Be specific and direct. Get the student's attention, establish eye contact, and describe what is wanted in a firm voice using alpha command language that is easily understood.
- Allow a reasonable time (at least 10 seconds) for the student to respond.
- Do not repeat the command more than once if the student does not comply. Instead, use some other consequence or action (like in-class time-out for younger students or being sent to the principal's office for older students) to deal with the noncompliance in this situation.
- Give commands while standing next to the student instead of from a distance. This is particularly important with antisocial students.

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Compliance with teacher instructions is typically a major problem with antisocial students and, on occasion, a problem with many students. It is a key source of conflict between teachers and students. The skilled use of avoidance, escape, and alpha commands will prevent many conflicts in the classroom, foster better relationships with antisocial students, and save a great deal of teaching time.

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