

## Discipline and New Teachers

*This post will be primarily of interest to new teachers, but it's also something that Education students will need to know about, since college is supposed to prepare you for your first year of teaching.*

New teachers often have discipline problems in their classrooms, even if they start out with a good set of behaviour expectations and fair consequences. This is often true because beginning teachers are still fine-tuning their discipline methods, perhaps making changes 'on-the-fly'. Students will often challenge new teachers. In addition, new teachers may be getting lots of advice from others ... some of it conflicting ... that may or may not be effective.

New teachers will often start off the year by giving clear consequences to kids who break the rules. But don't just show up on the first day with a big chart of rules to post on the wall. Instead, this needs to be done in a single whole period, where you discuss with students your expectations, and the reasons for them, get their feedback, and generate a list of expected behaviours and consequences that incorporates some of their suggestions. You *want* their input, especially with regard to consequences. Be flexible.

But problems will arise. The teacher is new, and problem kids will want to push back. They will want to find out if the teacher really 'means business', to see how much they can get away with. And some kids just won't get it; their inability to show empathy for others may mean they don't understand or care how their behaviour can affect the learning of others.

Naturally this will mean more confrontations. The new teacher will have to interrupt the teaching often, to bring students back on task. Students will complain that the teacher is too strict. The new teacher can quickly become frustrated.

What compounds the problem is that the more experienced teachers in the school may not be having the same difficulties. While their behaviour expectations may be similar, the students in their classes don't try to push the boundaries. Those teachers rarely have to react to behaviour problems, or interrupt their lessons to correct misbehaviours. This may make it appear

that they are lax on discipline, compared to what's going on in the new teacher's classroom.

All of this is normal.

It is important for the new teacher to realize *why* this is true, and what they need to do.

In my first year of teaching, there was a teacher who regularly stuck a certain misbehaving student in a closet, duct taped to a chair. I'm not kidding! It became a joke, and the student loved it!

I don't want it to seem here that I'm perfect ... far from it. Sometimes I had classes that made me want to tear my hair out (what little there is of it). But I always tried to be fair. Nevertheless, it took me *many many* years to learn effective discipline techniques.

In my first ever teaching job in a school in Toronto, about several months in, I did something very unprofessional and inexcusable. I was very frustrated with a particular student in a grade 9 class. He was several years older than the others, and was in school only because a judge had told him that it was that or jail. His demeanour could best be described as 'sullen and threatening'.

His behaviour was atrocious. He was continually interrupting the class with rude, sometimes obscene gestures and comments to others. He swore a lot, often to me. He didn't do any work.

I dealt with it the way I was told to ... by sending him to visit the Vice Principal, who dealt with discipline. It happened a lot. But nothing changed. I taught in a portable classroom outside the back of the school, and I suspect the student rather enjoyed the opportunity for a little walk around the school, and a smoke.

His bad behaviour never changed.

In one Monday morning class, I finally had had enough. He suggested that I do something that was quite anatomically impossible. I responded by picking him up, desk and all, and carrying him and the desk (while he was still in it) to the door and throwing him and the desk out onto the grass.

Quite calmly, actually. I returned to the board and continued teaching.

The class was remarkably well behaved for the rest of the week.

Such behaviour by a teacher nowadays would not be condoned, and shouldn't ever be, and rightly so. If a teacher did that today, they would be fired, and probably sued.

But things were different then I had a teacher in high school, who was huge and gruff, and also the football coach. He would regularly take misbehaving students out into the hallway, throw them against the lockers, and threaten to 'punch their lights out'. He knew all the parents, and was often encouraged by them to do whatever it took to keep their kids in line.

Anyway, in my case, nothing came of it. The student in question wasn't hurt at all. He got in trouble with the law several weeks later, and dropped out of school.

But I was really ashamed of what I had done, and never got physical with a student ever again. I learned better ways to deal with frustration, and more importantly, to help students.

More experienced teachers have a stronger 'presence' in the classroom. Their behaviour expectations are well understood by the students, who know exactly what they can and can't get away with. Experienced teachers have a much better command of the curriculum, and a much more automatic response to misbehaviour ... they've seen it all before. Experienced teachers also know the students better, and know their parents well enough to feel comfortable calling when there's a problem.

What is the new teacher to do?

The first thing that's important is to realize that there *will* be more behaviour problems, and that it's normal. You *will* have to spend more of your time in the first month or two dealing with discipline issues. That's normal too.

What is critical is that you do not stop what you're doing. If your discipline plan is a good one, with logical behaviour rules and fair consequences, and if your principal has approved it, you need to keep using it. Don't stop.

It will be easy to get discouraged, and say *'It's the same kids who keep getting into trouble all of the time, and they don't seem to changing their behaviour. So, what's the point?'* You may find yourself constantly emphasizing the negative behaviours of your students.

You might also feel that, if the rules aren't working, you should add a lot of prizes when kids do behave. *Don't do it!* Expected behaviours should not be rewarded.

Don't give up. Stick to your expectations, and continue to expect the best behaviour from your students. Call them on it every time they forget. Don't be tempted to use prizes for good behaviour; instead, use positive reinforcement in the form of praise.

Be prepared to *not* get as much curriculum covered in the first month as you'd planned. You'll need to *stop teaching* every time there is a behavior issue, and deal with it calmly but firmly. You don't continue your teaching until that behaviour stops. This takes time.

This technique is amazingly effective when students are talking while you're teaching. When the entire class comes to a standstill while you address the problem with a particular student, it puts a lot of pressure on the student in question. Teenagers usually don't like to be singled out like this.

Another technique I found effective once I'd built relationships with students was to stop the class and invite the student out into the hallway for a chat. Many teachers, myself included, would take that opportunity to yell a lot and threaten them with failure, multiple detentions, or various other unpleasant consequences. And yelling ... did I mention that?

But I learned a better way, late in my career. Out in the hallway, I would calmly and pleasantly ask them how they were doing, and then ask them something like this: *"John, is there anything wrong? You don't usually behave this way. Is there some difficulty in your life that I can help you with?"*

I'm not entirely sure why this works, but from experience I know it does!

Once when this happened, I was in the hallway with a student having this sort of discussion, quite pleasantly, as it turned out. Meanwhile we heard from down the hall another teacher with a kid in the hallway yelling and threatening them quite heatedly. My student and I looked at each other and I think we both smiled. I remember this quite clearly, and I never again had to deal with a problem from that student. He eventually became a good friend.

Showing you care works!

Once kids get the message, that your expectations must be met, things will improve. Try to keep your corrections positive, and stress the good behaviours expected. Try to build relationships with your students outside the classroom. Get to know their parents.

Get help from your administrators. Not only can they provide useful suggestions for getting through the day, but they can also provide out-of-class consequences for your discipline procedures; sometimes their intervention with your students may actually solve some of your problems.

Don't be discouraged when more experienced teachers tell you things like '*Well, I'm not having that problem*'. Not all experienced teachers make good mentors. Find someone who can see things through your eyes, and use their advice.

You may hear comments from others like '*Pick your battles*', or '*Don't stress over the little things*'. This is not good advice for a new teacher. Where inappropriate behaviour is concerned, call the students on it every time! No misbehaviour should be ignored if it is affecting the learning of others. Eventually the students will get it

You may even eventually be able to solve problems by looking at the offender and raising one eyebrow!

That never worked for me ... I can't raise just one eyebrow.

Most importantly, don't forget that even experienced teachers have problems with discipline on occasion. Sometimes we all find it necessary just to stop and say "*Hey! Be quiet!*"