Helping Kids with Behaviour Problems

*The information in this article was obtained from the excellent book "*Lost at School: Why Kids with Behaviour Problems are Falling Through the Cracks, and How We Can Help Them*", by Ross W. Greene. I bought it for Jesse, and while reading it, discovered that it describes a very useful approach to dealing with disruptive students. All schools need a copy of this, and teachers and beginning teachers need to read it.*

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Our most challenging students are ones which are attention-seeking, unmotivated and disruptive to the learning of others. Typically, schools attempt to change these behaviours through the use of consequences … rewards and punishments. But consequences, such as time-outs, removal of privileges, detentions and suspensions, often don't work for the kids who receive them most often.

The reason they don't work is that consequences are about attempting to teach kids the right and wrong way to behave, and giving them an incentive to behave the appropriate way. But these kids *already know how we want them to behave*. They know what the rules are. They even *want* to behave the right way. So it doesn't make much sense spending a lot of effort trying to show them what they already know. They need something else.

Kids with behaviour problems lack thinking skills.

Many years ago, kids with learning disabilities were described as 'dumb', or 'slow learners', or 'beyond help'. But as educators learned about the various disabilities, they began to discover ways to help all kids learn.

Similarly, kids with behaviour problems have a sort of disability, and need to learn some thinking skills. They need skills to help them regulate their emotions, skills to help them think about the outcomes of one's actions before they act, and skills to help them understand how their actions affect others. These kids have difficulty mastering behavioural, social and emotional challenges, and we need to *teach* them the skills they need.

The way we help students with more traditional developmental delays, such as in reading or math, is to assess the problems, and then provide individualized instruction in small steps, in a compassionate manner.

The same approach needs to be taken with kids who are developmentally delayed in terms of their *behaviour*. First, we need to understand which skills they are lacking, and identify the situations in which they have difficulty. Then we need to teach them the skills that will help them cope with these situations, and teach it cooperatively.

The difficulty lies in the fact that the problems are behavioural, not academic. Our first response (and sometimes our only response) is anger, frustration, and a readiness to dole out consequences.

Remember also that challenging kids aren't 'challenging' all the time. They may behave differently at home than at school. They may behave differently for their basketball coach than they do their math teacher. They may behave differently in one teacher's classroom than they do in another.

If we want to help these students, we have to do three things. We have to identify the skills they are lacking that lead to the behaviour problems. We need to identify the situations or triggers that cause the behaviours to occur. And finally, we need to find a way to help them learn the skills they are lacking.

Well-behaving students aren't behaving because of the school's discipline procedures. They don't need consequences; they have the social skills to adapt to the environment of the school. The school's discipline procedures *aren't needed* for the kids who are doing well. They *aren't working* for the kids who aren't doing well.

Just as specialized programming for kids with traditional learning disabilities is a lot of work for the classroom teacher, in a similar way, helping kids with behavioural challenges to learn the skills necessary to fit in is *also* a lot of work. But the end result will be less work, less stress and more effective classroom learning.

Teachers often have the philosophy that 'kids will do well if they *want* to'. Conversely, if they're not doing well, it's because they've *chosen* not to do the work, or to try, but to act out instead. I often feel this way about some students. "*If only they would care …*", or "*Why doesn't he pay attention*" or "*I can't force him to do the work*" or "*Why is he always talking instead of*

working". Our response is to try to convince the kid to *want to do well*, with rewards and punishments.

But if the kid doesn't have the skills in the first place, this philosophy serves no purpose. We need to identify the skills he is lacking, not academically, but in terms of dealing with a social situation that requires proper behaviour, and then *teach him those skills*.

When does the inappropriate behaviour occur? It occurs when the kid is in a situation where *the demands on him exceed his ability to behave appropriately*. He knows what is expected … he just doesn't know how to do it.

Let's look at some common descriptions of kids with behaviour problems.

"*He just wants attention*"
We all want attention. That's human nature. Some kids have the skills to seek it in socially acceptable ways. Others don't, so they get it by acting out.

"*He's manipulative*"
No, it just looks that way. Manipulation of another person … an adult … requires a skill set these kids don't have.

"*He has a bad attitude*"
Maybe, but he didn't get it by accident. It's probably the result of years of consequences applied to try to correct behaviours that he is incapable of demonstrating, because the skills he's lacking have never been taught to him.

Once you accept the idea that kids with behaviour problems lack critical thinking skills, things start to make more sense. Here are some skills that kids who are challenging often lack.

- They have difficulty handling transitions, as in moving from one activity ('discussing') to another ('reading quietly')
- They have difficulty doing things in a logical order. ("Why aren't you working?" "Oh, I was supposed to open my textbook …")
- They find it hard to concentrate on difficult or tedious tasks
- They have poor time sense

- They have difficulty keeping focused on a task
- They find it hard to consider the likely outcomes of their actions
- They have difficult expressing their thoughts or needs in words
- They have trouble understanding what is being said
- They find it hard to manage their frustration
- They have 'black and white' thinking, and find it hard to see the 'greys'
- They have difficult handling uncertainty or new things
- They have difficulty processing more than one instruction at a time
- They have inaccurate interpretations of themselves or the world around them ("*It's not fair*", or "*Why are you picking on me*", or "*I'm stupid*")
- They have difficulty interpreting social cues
- They lack basic social skills
- They don't know how to seek attention in appropriate ways
- They don't understand that their behaviour can have an effect on others
- They lack empathy, and have a hard time understanding someone else's point of view
- They don't understand how they are being perceived by others

If you are a teacher, you should be recognizing some of these skills as things particular students you know are lacking. That's the first step.

Now let's look at some specific skills that a student may be lacking, and how they will manifest themselves in your classroom.

<u>Kids who can't handle transitions</u>

Kids sometimes lack the skill to easily shift from one behaviour pattern to another. For example, they're in the hall at their locker, getting out books, eating a snack, talking with their friends, and generally doing what they want. A few minutes later they're expected to be in their desks, sitting quietly and listening to the teacher.

Shifting behaviours like this is a skill that behaviourally challenged kids may lack. We need to teach them how to deal with it. Elementary teachers do this all the time.

Kids who are impulsive, and don't consider consequences of their actions

Solving a math problem requires that you identify the problem you're trying to solve, think of solutions, explore the outcomes of those solutions, and pick the best one. All this requires an organized thinking process, in order to make a decision about what to do.

Kids in a social context who act without thinking often have disorganized thinking processes, and to avoid frustration, may choose the first behaviour that pops into their head. Reflecting on the likely outcomes of a behaviour is a higher-level skill that two-year olds don't have. Older kids with behaviour problems don't have it either.

Difficulty expressing needs or thoughts

Language or communication skills are an important part of functioning in society, so when a kid is lacking these, it should be expected that they will have difficulty meeting the social and behavioural demands of a classroom setting. Little kids will cry. Older ones will often say "*Screw you*". or "*Shut up*" when their peers try to get them to participate, because they don't have the verbal skills to express their ideas or what they are feeling. Sometimes they will swear. 'Lack of respect' is often just a lack of communication skills.

An inability to appreciate how one's behaviour can affect others

This is a critical skill for adults. Knowing that what we do affects not only those around us, but how those around us *perceive* us, helps us to adapt to different social situations and make friends.

In a classroom situation, kids who lack this skill also often lack empathy. Not only do they not realize that shouting out a comment to a friend across the room during a lesson is affecting the learning of others, but they also can't understand that others may think badly of them for doing this. They just don't get it.

Unfortunately, our first reaction to this is to punish with consequences. This does nothing to help kids learn why the behavior is inappropriate, or how to find alternate means of expressing themselves.

Whatever the inappropriate behaviour, a teacher won't be able to do anything about it unless the skill that the student is lacking is identified, and the situations in which it occurs are pinpointed.

Most challenging kids have many missing skills, and the inappropriate behaviours are triggered under many different circumstances. In order to

help these students learn the skills they need, it is best to focus on just one or two to begin with.

How do we help them?

One traditional approach that isn't very effective is to try to force a kid with a behaviour problem to meet our expectations. For example, if a kid is acting out in class, we might say to him "Kenny, go out and stand in the hallway. You can return when you think you can behave properly".

Teachers do this all the time. So do parents. The problem with this approach is that it doesn't identify Kenny's problem and does nothing to prevent the problem from reoccurring, because we haven't identified the skill he is lacking or the trigger that caused the inappropriate behaviour. We expect Kenny to solve his own problem, and learn to behave. But we haven't taught him anything.

It works with kids who have the skills to function in a classroom. But it doesn't work with kids who lack those skills.

Another approach is to remove some behavioural expectations altogether, particularly if they are minor ones. For example, a teacher may find himself constantly trying to keep David from making a big production out of sharpening his pencil, where his behaviour disturbs others. He may decide instead to ignore the problem, if it means David may be more amenable to having more important misbehaviours corrected. Perhaps the walk across the room and a few jokes with friends is all David needs to help him focus on the work, so that ignoring the behaviour may be worth it.

While this approach also does nothing to help identify the skill David is lacking or what triggers the misbehaviour, it may be valuable, if the teacher works on a few more challenging behaviours instead. Remember, it may be too overwhelming, for both the teacher and the student try to to tackle all the problems at once.

The best approach the teacher should use to help a problem student correct misbehaviour, and the focus of the book, is called Collaborative Problem Solving. Because the behaviours are highly predictable, you can undertake it proactively, rather than when the behaviour is happening and you're in the middle of teaching.

Cooperative Problem Solving is built upon the *relationship a teacher has with a student*.

The first step is to list all of the unacceptable behaviours, as well as the situations in which they occur. Then you choose one to deal with.

In a meeting with the student, a teacher who has a good relationship with him will engage him in a discussion about *one* problem behaviour and when it occurs. The goal is to get the student to understand how he behaves, how it makes him feel, and why he behaves that way. The discussion is very neutral, in that there are no recriminations, there is no discussion of consequences, and blame is not assigned. The student must feel that his concerns are being heard and understood. Empathize with his difficulties.

The student must be made aware of the effect of his behaviour on others. In other words, rather than saying “You know shouting out the answers is against the classroom rules”, you might say instead “When you shout out answers, Bobby and Kenny have trouble concentrating”. Similarly, you must discover the ***student’s*** concerns. Why does he think he does the things he does?

Next, the discussion should lead to some sort of compromise, where a solution to the problem behaviour satisfies both the teacher and the student. You invite the student to help formulate a plan that will help him deal with his concerns, one which also satisfies your concerns. You’re working together to solve the problem. Explore lots of possible solutions.

What you’re *not* doing in this process is telling the kid he’s making bad choices (he doesn’t know how to make good ones), and you’re not telling him what the more desirable behaviours are (he can’t do them). You’re also not imposing a solution on him.

The last step in the process is to agree to meet again if your combined solution to the problem doesn’t seem to be working as both of you had hoped. Often the solution will just need to be modified a little.

The result? In the course of this procedure you’ve:
- identified a problem behaviour and what triggers it
- ensured that the student knows why the behaviour is unacceptable

- found a solution cooperatively that you both can live with
- agreed to meet again if things don't go well

The solution you have found together to help solve the problem is the skill the student was lacking in the first place. You've helped him learn a new skill that will let him participate in a classroom setting without causing problems.

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My brief synopsis of the book here gives just an outline of the method and its rationale. I urge teachers to get the book and read it; it's full of actual conversations between teachers and problem students that illustrate the process well.