

Sweat the Small Stuff

When dealing with students who have behaviour problems, you will often hear advice such as '*Pick your battles*', or '*Don't sweat the small stuff*'. The implication is that some misbehaviours are too minor to spend a lot of time worrying about, and that some misbehaviours are worth our time correcting, while others aren't.

What you as a new teacher need to remember is that some of these theories of behaviour management were developed by observing rats in 'Skinner boxes'. When a rat performs a particular behaviour and it is ignored, that behaviour tends to diminish with time.

But students are thinking people, and when their misbehaviours are ignored by teachers, and *they see that they are being ignored*, students will see this as permission to continue the behaviour, and it will *escalate*.

If you ignore defiance, disrespect, aggressiveness or bullying, no matter how minor the incident, it will only get worse.

Suppose as a Math teacher I gave a student a 'time out' for two minutes whenever they made a mistake. Suppose mistakes made on tests resulted in detentions. Suppose students who ask lots of questions because they aren't understanding things could expect to lose privileges.

Clearly none of these strategies would help the students learn how to do mathematics.

Yet when students exhibit behaviour problems, this is exactly the consequences we give them. They don't learn what they need to learn.

When a student is rude, our response is to give them a consequence, such as staying in at recess. This isn't teaching them about good behaviour, or about how not to be rude. They're not learning new, more acceptable behaviours. They're just being punished.

If we want student behaviour to improve, we must *teach them* the proper behaviour.

For example, a student is caught running and pushing in the hallway. One possible teacher response is to say “*If you behave that way in the hallways again, you’ll have to stay in at recess*”. This teaches the student nothing about proper behaviour, and what’s worse, the teacher *has just given the student permission to misbehave in the hallway ...* this time, and next time too, if he doesn’t mind giving up a recess.

Instead, what the teacher needs to do is correct the behaviour, and make sure the student understands what the acceptable behaviour is. The response should be “*That’s not the way we behave in our school. Go back to the end of the hallway and let me see you walk this time, without pushing anyone*”. You’re teaching a skill, just like in Math.

Discipline should never be finished until you get the correct behaviour.

As teachers, especially new teachers, we cannot afford to overlook the minor misbehaviours. We need to ‘sweat the small stuff’. Every single ‘small’ behaviour problem is a battle worth fighting, because better behaved students make your teaching more effective, and may even lessen the occurrence of more major transgressions. What we are doing is teaching correct behaviour, and making students practice it over and over until they ‘get it’ is sometimes the only way. If they’re pushing and yelling when entering your classroom, make them go out and come back in again respectfully. If they interrupt during class, talk about the kind of behaviour you expect, and make them practice it, as many times as necessary. Don’t make the practice seem like a punishment; make sure the student knows that you are helping them to learn new behaviour.

Teaching behaviour skills is part of the job of teaching. Yes, it takes time away from the regular curriculum instruction, but in the long run it will be worth it. This is a strategy that will eventually pay off in better behaved students, both inside and outside the classroom.