Using Empathy to Help Kids with Behaviour Issues

As an adult, you know what empathy is. It's showing understanding, sympathy and compassion, and you probably demonstrate it a lot.

Here's the problem. As teachers, the people we need to show empathy to are probably the ones who need it the most, but they're often the ones we're least likely to demonstrate it with. I'm talking about kids who cause problems in your class.

Kids with behaviour issues will interrupt your lessons. They will forget to bring their notebook to class. They will argue and maybe fight in the playground. They won't get the homework done.

There are various ways that teachers deal with these problems. I've written about them before. In this article I'd like to focus on using *empathy*, because it is a very hard skill to use effectively; it takes lots of practice to get good at. It takes time.

The kind of student we're talking about here is one who doesn't respond to ordinary interventions, such as moving in close and giving a choice.

For example: "*Billy, you aren't opening your book, after I've asked you to twice. You need to decide if you're going to do the work now, or if you want me to help you with it during recess*". Most kids will respond to this, and won't repeat the behaviour very often.

Notice how this intervention isn't about punishment "*You're staying in at recess!*", but about getting the work done. The kid will catch on quickly that he'll have to do the work eventually … he might as well do it now, rather that missing recess.

In this article about empathy, we want to correct inappropriate behaviours that happen a lot, where interventions like the one above don't work.

One of the problems student teachers have is that they may not feel comfortable using empathetic solutions to behaviour problems, for a number of reasons. A student teacher may not know the students well. The supervising teacher may want you to deal with behaviour problems quickly, so that you can get on with your lesson, and may have other things

for you to do at lunch break instead of talking to students. (This will especially be true if the supervisor is not a very good teacher). You may have had *no-one show you what it looks like to use empathy*.

Student teachers (or new teachers) may not have had good role models when they were in school. Often, it's too easy for a teacher to use standard techniques for dealing with behaviour issues. I'm sure you've heard all of these before:

- *"Johnny, you know that behaviour is inappropriate. You know the rules. Sit down and open your notebook!"*
- *"I guess you don't care about hurting other kids!"*
- *"You know, you can't always have things your own way."*
- *"Why are you out of your seat again? You know better than that!"*
- *"If you don't stop talking, you're going to have to [insert your consequence here]"*
- *"I've had enough of your behaviour. Pick up your books and go to the office".*

Teachers will use some of these quite often. One or two of these might be necessary reminders for kids who are already on a behaviour plan. I've used most of them, and others.

The problem? None of these responses addresses the real issue: why the kid is continually misbehaving. Without having that discussion with the student and trying to find a mutually agreeable way to solve the problem, it will keep happening over and over. He's been given all the standard consequences and *they don't work*.

If I were a student teacher supervisor, one of the most important skills I would try to have my student teacher learn would be how to deal with ordinary behaviour problems in the classroom. I would insist they practice it … *even if it meant disrupting a lesson they were teaching*. Dealing with problem kids, as far as I can determine, is not taught very well in Teachers' College, but it is one of the *critical skills to have* if a new teacher wants to do a good job.

OK, so what about empathy? What would it look like if a teacher decides to show empathy when dealing with problem kids?

First, you need information from the kid. You need to find out what's going on, but in a way that is totally neutral …. no recriminations, no blame and no threats of punishment.

You might ask:

- *"I've noticed that you are getting mad a lot at other kids during recess. What's up?"*
- *"I've noticed that you haven't been doing much homework lately. How come?"*
- *"I've noticed that your behaviour hasn't been very good in my class recently. Is there something wrong? Can I help?"*

You want the kid to talk to you. That's why the statements have to be neutral. You're trying to make it clear that you want to help, not punish.

If you have a good relationship with the student, he may say something. The conversation could go like this:

Teacher: *"I've noticed that you've been talking out a lot while I'm trying to teach my lesson. What's up?"*
Student: *"I dunno".*
Teacher: *"You don't always do that. What's going on? Is there something I can help with?"*
Student: *"I don't get the stuff you're doing now."*

You're not done yet. Keep asking questions.

Teacher: *"You don't get it? How come?"*
Student: *"It's boring. I don't like long division".*
Teacher: *"So when you're bored, you start talking to others in the class?"*
Student: *"Yeah, I guess so".*

You're going to keep asking questions until you are certain you know what is causing the problem. This isn't easy. I've had conversations much like this with grade three students, junior high students, and grade twelve students. It's always the same. Most of the time kids aren't being bad on purpose; there's often an underlying issue that's creating the problem.

What you're trying to do is *solve a problem together*. The kid is being bad. You want his behaviour to improve. But in order to come to a mutual understanding and a solution that you can both agree on, the kid has to *know you care and are willing to listen*, and aren't about to say something like "*If your behaviour doesn't improve, I'm going to send you to the principal*". He's heard that before, and it hasn't worked. You don't want to impose your solution on him.

How will you accomplish something together? By *collaborating* to find a solution.

The next step, after you're sure you understand the problem, is to state your concerns clearly and non-judgmentally.
For example:
"I'm concerned about the other kids in the class who can't concentrate when you're talking. They're not learning very well, and you aren't either".

Now you understand his problems, and he understands yours.

Next, you're ready to find a solution together. It would be much better if the kid can suggest a solution that you can live with; you are going to try to prompt him to suggest something:

"I wonder if there's any way we could solve this problem. You find the material a little boring, so you talk to people. I'm trying to help every student learn, and I can't. Do you have any ideas?"

or:

"I wonder if there's a way you could let me know you're getting frustrated, before you hit someone".

or:

"I wonder if there's a way for us to help you get started on your work so you can do it all by yourself. Do you have any ideas?"

You're trying to get the kid to suggest a solution. Keep in mind that any solution that you would *like* to impose (a week of detentions, calling his mother, suspension from class, a visit to the principal, flogging) have in all likelihood already been tried by others, and haven't worked. (OK, maybe

not the last one). You need a solution that will work, *and the kid has to think it will help.*

Any solution you come up with together has to be *realistic* and *mutually satisfactory*. Realistic means that the solution is plausible; both you and the kid will be willing to follow through with it.

If the kid can't come up with one, you may have to suggest one or two. Either way, the two of you will talk about what might work. You're looking for a solution that is workable, and that you both agree might help.

For example:
- "If you move my desk away from Sandra's, I probably would be able to concentrate more"
- "I know I shouldn't swear. I'll try to remember. Can you help remind me?"
- "How about if I change the way I teach once in a while so you don't always have to sit and listen?"
- "If I made an outline of the notes for you, would that help you to pay attention?"

Agree to talk again with the student if your mutually-agreed-upon solution doesn't work.

Dealing with behaviour problems this way takes a little time. It may require a pause in the lesson while you talk to a student in the hall. It may mean taking a lunch break to talk to him. *But it also means that you may be finally actually solving the problem.*

Empathy for these kids looks like this:
- You're giving the student a chance to explain the problem, and he knows you care enough to listen
- The student is aware of your concerns
- The student knows you care enough about him to allow him to propose or agree to a solution

Or to put it more succinctly … he knows you care.

I don't always have the patience to use empathy this way. I don't yell at students any more, and I seldom let anger show, but I still find myself taking the easy way out … letting the problem go, if it seems to be solved for this period using conventional means.

But every time I've had conversations with students about their behaviour, where I make an effort to understand, to state my concerns clearly and non-judgmentally, and to work with the student to find a mutually agreeable solution, it pays off.

The method takes time, and it's also a hard skill to learn; you have to practice it a lot, especially if you've been teaching for a while and are more used to the 'authoritarian' solutions.

Some of the ideas I talked about in this article I've described before, particularly the part about solving problems collaboratively; here I wanted to emphasize empathy, a characteristic that many teachers don't always exhibit with problem kids.