

## When Things Go Wrong

*This article describes things that some teachers have done wrong that have either gotten them into trouble or resulted in them leaving the profession. In other words, things that you don't ever want to do.*

*Some of this is very personal, but I think it's worth talking about.*

A certain percentage of the people who work at *any job* are not suited for the job they're in. Some plumbers are bad plumbers. Some accountants are bad accountants. It's the same with teaching ... some teachers shouldn't be teachers.

This isn't about teachers who take advantage of students sexually; those people shouldn't be allowed anywhere near a school, and usually face criminal charges and are banned from ever teaching again. That's the way it should be.

But there are other ways that teachers can get into trouble by making poor choices. Let me tell you about some of them, using examples are *all real*.

In 2009 a teacher was charged with professional misconduct (by the Teachers' Association) and suspended from work without pay for several months. It's highly unlikely he will ever be hired again. He was working as a substitute teacher. Rather than follow the lesson plan left by the regular teacher, he showed an inappropriate movie instead ('*Gone in 60 Seconds*', about car theft). He also admitted being disrespectful to students, referring to them in derogatory terms and mocking both their religion and heritage.

OK, that's not something you would ever do. And that teacher? Maybe he was always that kind of person, in which case removing him from the job was a good thing. But maybe he was just having a bad day. Maybe he was very upset because his wife left him ... or he was massively in debt.

Regardless of the reason, his poor behaviour choices on that day cost him his career.

The next example is scary. A PhysEd teacher was on her way from her previous class to the gym. She wasn't late. But while she was walking

towards the gym, one student in her upcoming PhysEd class managed to get into the gym unsupervised, and used a climbing rope. He fell from the top and broke his neck, and ended up paralyzed.

The teacher was sued ... and lost. The judge ruled that she shared some of the blame for leaving the gym door unlocked, (even though it wasn't her responsibility to lock it) and leaving dangerous equipment out where students could use it. The school was also held responsible.

As an Elementary teacher, you might assume that something like that could never happen to you. But it easily could. Consider ...

Every day, students are left unsupervised for a few minutes here and a few minutes there. We need to get some coffee. We step out into the hallway for a moment to talk to a student or another teacher. We take students to the gym, but allow some of them to get there well before we do. We send them off to their next class, but when they get there, the teacher hasn't arrived yet. We're late for recess supervision.

It happens all the time.

But if a student trips (or is pushed) and hits his head against the edge of a desk, he could easily be seriously injured. If a student throws a pencil or some other object, someone could easily be hurt. A student could choke on something they've put in their mouth.

If a teacher is *not in the room* when incidents like this happen, that teacher could be in serious trouble.

All teachers take that risk, occasionally. If we trust our students to behave, we may leave them unsupervised for a moment or two. But every time we do it, we are risking our careers.

Sometimes teachers don't take that risk. I have a class this year that I rarely leave unsupervised because I don't trust the behaviour of some of the students. Jr. High boys think it's funny to push someone's head down onto the water fountain when they're drinking, risking a broken tooth. They think nothing of tripping someone who is running, risking a head injury.

They don't think of consequences. Sometimes I think they don't care.

As a new teacher, you are unlikely to know your students well enough to leave them unsupervised, even for sixty seconds. Don't do it.

Recently a teacher was charged with professional misconduct for what he said to a student. After keeping several students in for a detention, he became angry with them, and sarcastic. He told one student to 'shut your mouth'. That was all it took for him to get into trouble.

Is there a lesson here for all of us, and especially new teachers? Of course, there is.

Regardless of how bad your day is going, or how many bad things are happening in your life, or how disrespectful your students are, *there are some things that you must never do:*

- never, ever show your anger
- never be disrespectful to a student
- never use sarcasm

That first one is hard. Kids *will* make you angry. But you have to keep it inside, and maintain a professional attitude, treating all kids with respect and a caring attitude, even if sometimes you feel like you'd like to do them bodily harm! (This doesn't mean you can't talk to them firmly, as a loving parent would).

Very few other professions expect you to behave this way. In the past, I was sometimes quick to express anger with students (although I was never disrespectful). As a Christian, I've found it much easier to deal with problem students in a caring way, without getting angry. God is helping me with that.

Despite the fact that teachers are allowed to use discipline methods '*in loco parentis*', or 'the same way a loving parent would do', you are never allowed to use corporal punishment. Ever. You can't slap, hit or push a student. You will lose your job.

Touching students is also frowned upon, although it is allowed. This is good news for Elementary teachers, who provide a lot of hugs, and 'arm around the shoulder' contact. Little kids need it.

Teachers of older kids have a problem. Those kids sometimes need a little physical reassurance too. Unfortunately, after a number of teachers were charged for inappropriate touching or sexual misconduct, it was recommended to teachers that they not take the risk of touching students in case it was misinterpreted.

Some teachers find that unacceptable, and continue to put an arm around a student who is in tears, or provide a hug when appropriate. They're willing to take the risk, because it makes them better teachers.

Up until a few years ago, I was very shy. I never ever hugged students, or put my arm around them. But in trying to overcome my shyness, I also discovered that showing you care sometimes requires a hand on the shoulder, a comforting arm when someone is upset, or a hug. While other teachers are becoming leery of too much physical contact in case it is misinterpreted, I find myself doing more and more of it, because it makes me a better teacher. I guess I'm taking a risk, but I'm comfortable with it.

Beginning teachers who have any contact with older students, however, need to be very careful. Discuss it with other teachers, or your principal.

In 2011, a beginning PhysEd teacher was officially reprimanded for unprofessional behaviour. Once again, it is unlikely he will ever be rehired. During a class, he stepped out of the room to talk to a female student, trying to convince her not to drop his class. The conversation went on for 40 minutes while his class went unsupervised. But he did more than that. During the conversation, he used inappropriate language when discussing the student's relationship with her boyfriend, and referred to his own personal life and sexual relationships.

As a beginning Elementary teacher, you aren't going to have conversations like that with your students. But if you are in a school with *older* kids, you may encounter them in the hallways. If you're from the area, some of them may even be your friends. The best thing to remember is that if you are acting as a teacher, *all students need to be treated as students, not friends*. And some conversations are always inappropriate for a teacher to have with a student.

Many teachers get into trouble for saying derogatory things about another teacher, either to students or to another staff member. The bottom line here is that the Code of Professional Conduct requires that a teacher talk to the

person involved first, and then if the difficulties can't be settled, inform that person that you will speak to an administrator about it. But even then, it is highly unprofessional to complain about that teacher to others. There is a process to follow if you feel there are problems; let the system deal with it.

It may in fact be true that the person you have a problem with is doing bad things. Maybe they're being disrespectful to students, or not fulfilling all their duties as a teacher, or doing a poor job of teaching. Regardless of the problem, it is your responsibility to talk to that person *first* in order to try to clear up the difficulty.

*At least one person reading this knows that I have not always lived up to this expectation. Sometimes the problem is so egregious that it's hard not to talk about it with others who are directly involved. In my case, I was very careful to do so only with someone I trusted implicitly. That's not an excuse; I'm fallible just like everybody else.*

As a teacher, you may feel that anything you do in your personal life outside of school is your own business, and no-one else's.

To a certain extent that is true. But there are exceptions. Teachers are held to a higher standard of behaviour in the community than others. It's a fact you'll have to live with. For example, if your Facebook page is full of photos of you drinking with friends, and some of you are obviously intoxicated, you will likely not get a teaching job.

If you spend a lot of time in bars, or frequently attend parties where alcohol is served, and students from the school where you teach are there, you could lose your job.

If you are convicted of any criminal offense, you will likely lose your job. One teacher found this out when he was charged with unsafe use of a firearm. Another lost his job after he was convicted of driving while intoxicated. Note that these are *criminal* convictions. Civil matters generally aren't that serious. Your job won't be in peril if you get a speeding ticket or a parking fine. (I can see a few teachers breathing a sigh of relief at that!)

*The purpose of this article was to point out that teachers must always behave in a professional manner, regardless of circumstances, and*

*sometimes even outside of school. This can sometimes be a hard lesson to learn for beginning teachers. This is something worth discussing with other teachers; find out how they deal with stress and interact with students. Put what you learn into practice in your own life as a teacher. And of course, try to let God help.*