

# Introduction

In a seminar for teachers, held in a small South Texas border town, we were discussing with participants the best ways to defuse angry and hostile students. Ms. Stevens, an eighth-grade math teacher, mentioned that just the other day she'd used humor to defuse a situation with a student in her class who is very troubled. I (Brian Mendler) wasn't sure what she meant until she told us about Miguel. Ms. Stevens warned the group that Miguel occasionally used inappropriate language, but none of us had any idea that it was as bad as it was. The boy was about six feet tall and could be quite intimidating. His black hair was halfway down his back. He wore boots with thick heels. His tank top displayed muscles normally seen on a man in his mid-twenties. His baseball cap was always on backwards and his dark brown eyes were piercing. Miguel was known as a fighter, often stirring up trouble with other kids. His home life was a mess. His father was in jail and his mother worked three jobs in order to support Miguel and his three younger brothers. They lived in a small trailer on the outskirts of town, with few legitimate employment opportunities but an energetic school staff.

"All the other students were already working on their assignment. All I did was ask him to take out his notebook and a pen," Ms. Stevens told the seminar. "He glared at me and in a deep and nasty tone replied, 'I ain't gonna do what you say you skinny ugly bitch.'"

Dead silence fell on Ms. Stevens's room as the students awaited her reply. "I was sick of the same old response,"

Ms. Stevens told the seminar participants. "I'd already written him up 58 times. I constantly removed him and this was where that had gotten us. He was no better. He still hated my class and me. He was still rude, disrespectful, and defiant. Miguel was succeeding in making my life miserable, but I decided that today would be different. I decided that just for today he was not going to get to me. I would not be defeated in my own classroom. I would not let him win. So with the sternest face I could muster I walked directly over to Miguel. I was standing about two feet from his chiseled frame. I looked right into his eyes and with all the energy I could muster, I replied, "You think I'm skinny? That's the best news I've heard all year! Finally someone thinks I'm skinny. Get over here, Miguel, so I can give you a hug. Hang on everyone; I need to call my husband! Miguel thinks I'm skinny!" A roar of laughter filled the seminar room.

"I hugged that boy as tight as I could," she told our group. "And then, right there in class, I called my husband. 'Honey, can you believe Miguel just called me skinny? He just got the entire class a night free of homework by complimenting me.'

"Way to go, Miguel," my husband bellowed back through the phone as I held it up to the class so they could hear that I really was talking to him." Ms. Stevens then looked at us and said, "For the first time all year, Miguel was speechless. He was defused. It looked as if his bubble had been burst. I smiled at him and, finally, he smiled back." "You got me, Ms. Stevens. That was a good one," Miguel said. "For the first time, Miguel and I connected. Without saying another word, he took out a pen and began taking notes." Ms. Stevens then added, "Isn't it amazing how our spouse or significant other knows our most difficult students better than anyone else in our class?"

So true, I thought. For me, the name wasn't Miguel, but I knew everyone in that room could relate to these challenges, which we all face daily.

What Ms. Stevens said to Miguel was truly remarkable and not easy to do. It required skill, determination, and courage. In

fact, many of the things discussed in this book will not be easy to do. We are not interested in the easy way out if no progress is seen. We don't think it takes a whole lot of skill to write kids up and throw them out. Anyone can do that. Anyone can give a detention, or an extended detention, or an in-school suspension, or an out-of-school suspension. We want to be better. We want you to be better. We want to defuse and disarm hostile and explosive situations before they happen. We are interested in two things at all times: We want to keep students in class, and we want to get back to teaching. Those are our goals. That is what Ms. Stevens did, and boy, did she look tough in front of her class.

This book contains many anecdotes about our teaching experiences. For the sake of clarity, we will introduce each anecdote with the initials of the author who is telling the story.

We have shared stories like Ms. Stevens's numerous times at different workshops across the country. They usually inspire other teachers to tell their stories about challenging student behavior. In Tallahassee, Florida, a diminutive lady, Ms. Hall (who was 77 years young) raised her hand. "You're never going to believe what one of my students said to me just the other day. His name was Bill. He told me that he wasn't going to take out his books, and then asked me how many times I had had sex with my husband. The whole class was watching. You could hear a pin drop. When I didn't answer immediately, he asked if I was ignoring him. I looked him square in the eye and said, 'No, I was just counting.' The whole class cracked up. Bill actually laughed too." He shook Ms. Hall's hand and knew that from then on he would have to try making some other teacher mad. Ms. Hall wasn't going to bite.

Our parents taught us that "sticks and stones will break our bones but names will never harm us." This sound advice can be extremely difficult to implement when our buttons are pushed. Yet, when these moments occur, real-life opportunities exist to teach our students how to handle hurtful behavior that may come their way. We must find ways of getting beyond, "You said *what* to me? No one uses that tone of voice with me. Get out and don't come back until you are ready to learn!"

## xviii Strategies for Successful Classroom Management

Teaching students who are difficult and hostile takes effort and preparation. These kids are not easy. Since they mostly don't trust adults, they try their best to make our lives miserable. They believe we will quit on them just as everyone else has. When we don't, they often get temporarily worse, trying to prove to themselves that we will give up but secretly hoping we won't. It is difficult but possible to train ourselves to understand this dynamic. It is difficult but possible to learn not to be instinctive in our responses, but to think things through. It is difficult but possible to train our ear to hear what kids are saying instead of how they are saying it. It is difficult but possible to connect with difficult students and influence change. Working with students who are difficult is not easy, but it can be extremely rewarding and it is a part of the job. We are not paid to just teach the "good" students or the "smart" students or the "happy" students or the "normal" students. Great teachers teach the students they are given. They don't complain, they don't whine, and they don't waste time.

Like all decent people, Ms. Stevens and Ms. Hall were undoubtedly offended by their students' remarks, but they chose to handle things with competence and dignity. In doing so, they earned the respect of these students and reinforced themselves as dependable even in tough times. They were attacked, but did not attack back. By not attacking back they were less likely to have these things said to them again. Both students unloaded their ammunition. They fired the best rockets they had and did no damage. This is one of the most powerful ways that kids learn to stop firing and how others learn what to do when fired at. A major key in dealing with aggressive behavior is learning how to stay personally connected without taking offensive behavior personally and then responding effectively without attacking. It takes confidence and skills that all educators can learn to effectively defuse potentially explosive situations. Our lives then become so much easier when working with students with behavior difficulties, and our schools become safer.

During the last decade or so, many schools have enacted zero tolerance policies in efforts to make schools safer. The result has been neither an increase in safety (schools always have been and remain among the safest places for kids) nor changed behavior among those who are excluded from school. Our belief is that we must embrace all students, particularly those who are the most challenging. More than anyone else, it is they who need better ways to cope, and we need them to discover more productive ways of redirecting and expressing their frustrations.

Do you ever wonder why some teachers have few, if any, behavior problems in their class? Why it is that Student A completely behaves in music class, but terrorizes the teacher in art class? What does the music teacher do that the art teacher doesn't? Why is it that certain teachers are the ones sought for the placement of tough kids? What do they do, how do they act and react? This book shares effective practices and offers practical, real-life suggestions, examples, and solutions to these problems from the perspective of the best classroom educators.