
Introduction

Among the top reasons why teachers are deemed unsuccessful or leave the profession is their inability to effectively manage student behavior, experts say.

—Seema Mehta, “Controlling a Classroom Isn’t as Easy as ABC,”
Los Angeles Times, December 14, 2009

One of the biggest challenges facing classroom teachers today is the ongoing need to address problem behavior. In addition to this challenge, teachers are subjected to many other pressures on a daily basis, such as the need to increase achievement scores, effectively teach to students with diverse needs, and increase capacity to serve all students, often with decreasing funds and support. One fact remains clear: These goals cannot be achieved unless teachers are equipped with sound classroom-management techniques designed to establish the kind of classroom environment necessary to support quality instruction and student learning.

Many successful approaches have been identified in published literature and best practices in schools for addressing problem behavior and for establishing desirable classroom behavior. These approaches include the systematic application of proactive systems and strategies for preventing problem behavior and teaching desirable behavior. In addition, there are many effective correction strategies for following up on occurrences of problem behavior aimed at reducing future occurrences of these behaviors and increasing rates of desirable behavior. These strategies target problem behavior *before* it has a chance to occur and *after* it has occurred, both of which are absolutely necessary for classroom management.

However, there is another window for managing problem behavior, and that is strategies for responding to behavior *immediately following its occurrence*. Many teachers have experienced the situation where they attempted to correct a problem behavior and ended up with a worse one—which means that the procedure used escalated the problem rather than corrected it. For example, a student throws some paper on the floor while

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the teacher is explaining something. The teacher stops the explanation and tells the student that it is not acceptable to disrupt the class and directs the student to pick up the paper. The student mumbles a disrespectful comment, further discussion ensues resulting in the student being sent to the time-out area for disrespect. In this vignette, the student begins by throwing paper on the floor and ends with displaying disrespectful behavior and is removed to time-out with loss of instruction time for the teacher and the rest of the class. The way the teacher responded to the initial problem behavior, throwing paper on the floor, more than likely escalated the student to display disrespect, resulting in removal and loss of instruction time. Suppose the teacher, instead of responding to the initial behavior of the student, maintained the explanation, directed the class to the class activity, then approached the student privately and asked the student to retrieve the paper and put it where it needed to be. In this vignette, the student would be less likely to disrupt the class, exhibit disrespectful behavior, and be removed from the class to the time-out area.

The purpose of this book is to present strategies for responding to problem behavior in a way that is more likely both to defuse the situation by avoiding escalation and to correct the problem. The primary focus is to examine the initial response to the different kinds of common behaviors teachers face in classrooms. The rationale for this book is that this initial response, by and large, determines what the student or students may do next. In this sense, it is this initial response and subsequent *interactions* that determine the direction of the student behavior.

Defusing Problem Behavior in the Classroom is primarily designed for teachers as they are the front line for addressing problem behavior in schools, especially in classrooms, where students spend most of their time at school. The information should also be useful to specialists and behavior-support teams who have the responsibility of assisting teachers with managing challenging and persistent behavioral issues. Finally, these procedures for managing interactions have relevance for administrators who are charged with following up directly student office referrals and other serious behavior.

There are six chapters in this book. Chapter 1, *Seven Key Behavioral Principles*, opens with an examination of the relationship between teacher-student interactions, when problem behavior is being addressed, and subsequent student behavior. Guidelines based on sound behavioral research and best practices are presented for managing these interactions to ensure that the student's behavior is not escalated and that appropriate behavior is obtained. These behavioral principles are then applied in detail in the following chapters to defuse the most common problem behaviors teachers face in K–12 classrooms: Chapter 2, *Defusing Off-Task Behavior*; Chapter 3, *Defusing Rule Infractions*; Chapter 4, *Defusing Disrespectful Behavior*; Chapter 5, *Defusing Agitation*; and Chapter 6, *Defusing Noncompliance and Limit Testing*. Five topics are addressed in each chapter: (1) description of the problem behavior;

(2) prerequisite conditions; (3) illustration, Grades K–12; (4) defusion steps for addressing the problem behavior; and (5) application. In Chapter 2, three illustrations are presented for student groupings (kindergarten and elementary, secondary, and specialist classes) to demonstrate the range of application for the defusing strategies. In Chapters 3 through 6, one example per chapter is selected to sample the student groupings. A practice example is also provided at the end of these chapters, followed by a response key in the Appendices at the end of the book.

In Closing Remarks, the main ideas of the book are summarized. Reproducible forms, checklists, and response keys to the practice problems are presented in the Appendices.