

7. FAIR AND PREDICTABLE CONSEQUENCES

“For some educators, discipline means the power of the teacher to control the behavior of their students ... For other educators, discipline means an opportunity to teach students a set of values about how people can live together in a democratic society ... Discipline is perceived as the process of helping students internalize these values and to develop self-control over their drives and feelings.”

—Nicholas Long and William Morse

While the word “consequences” may conjure up negative images that look more like punishment, in actuality there are a full range of consequences available, ranging from those involving only the teacher in the classroom to those involving a school team and the school administrator or even a division-level administrator. The severity of the consequences can also range from minor to very significant.



The student discipline section of *Appropriate Educational Programming in Manitoba: Standards for Student Services* (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006a) (which is based on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Human Rights

“School divisions shall:

Provide reasonable accommodation for students who have exceptional learning needs that affect their behaviour, and when disciplining a student, take into consideration the student’s ability to comply and the amount of support required.”

(Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006a)

Code) reminds us that fair is not always equal. In other words, we must take into account the individual abilities and needs of a student when we are deciding on appropriate consequences.

Negative consequences may be necessary when other approaches to problem behaviour are unsuccessful. However, they are not effective when overused.

Establish consequences to inappropriate behaviours ahead of time. For example,

- owing time at recess, lunch, or after school to make up for time lost in class
- withholding a privilege or desired activity
- re-organizing the seating plan
- quietly informing the student that you would like to talk to him or her after class

- Develop consensus among the whole school staff to determine when it is appropriate to send a student to the office. Some schools define this as a bottom-line offence. All offences above the bottom line are handled by the classroom/subject-area teacher, while all those below the bottom line are dealt with by administration due to the severity of the offense.

The most effective consequences are

- immediate (but not disruptive or intensive)
- reasonable (and not embarrassing or frustrating)
- well planned (but flexible)
- practical and easy to implement

Since the goal is to reduce the incidence of a specific problem behaviour, teachers have to monitor the effectiveness of negative consequences and adapt and change them as needed.

Focus on the Behaviour

Disapprove of the behaviour, not the student. Use words and/or actions that focus on the problem behaviour. This approach tells the student that the adult believes he or she is capable of behaving in positive ways. It also reduces power struggles that can create a negative atmosphere in the classroom.

A Manitoba administrator pointed out that taking student behaviour personally is often a difficulty for teachers. Getting “emotionally hooked” sends the message to students that they can push your buttons and disrupt your day if they choose. This shifts control over to the students and weakens your ability to manage the classroom. Instead, de-personalize the student behaviour, view it simply as information, and rely on your classroom management plan.

Sample Strategies for Beginning with Low-Key Responses

Feedback

Both verbal and non-verbal feedback are effective responses to problem behaviour. For example, say the student’s name out loud with an accompanying gesture, such as fingers over lips. Or use just one or two words, such as “Jordan, chair” when a student is rocking back on two chair legs. Teachers need to be aware that their tone of voice can escalate or defuse a situation.

Actions, Not Words

When possible, use actions rather than words. For example, if two students are whispering during a lesson, stop talking and wait patiently for them to stop. Then continue the lesson without a reprimand. If a student is bouncing a ball in the gym while instructions are being given, simply walk over and collect the ball until the instructions are finished. Return the ball when the activity starts. Talking less and acting more can often bring about positive classroom change without paying an excessive amount of attention to problem behaviour. Taking action also communicates that learning and teaching are important and need to be the focus.

Proximity

Send a quiet and effective message about behavioural expectations by moving around the classroom while teaching and stopping for a moment near specific students.

Standing near a student who is engaged in disruptive and/or attention-seeking behaviour is often enough to end the behaviour. This technique communicates, even without eye contact, that the teacher knows what is happening in the classroom and expects positive behaviour.

Get the Activity Moving

Move through transitions quickly and reduce or eliminate down time. Trying to catch and correct inappropriate behaviours during such times is usually futile and misdirected. Just get the next activity underway and cue students to the desired behaviours (Emmer et al. 174-5).

Hurdle Helping

Offer encouragement, support, and assistance to prevent students from becoming frustrated with learning activities. This kind of help can take many forms, from enlisting a peer for support to supplying additional information and hints that will help the student complete the learning task successfully.

Eye Contact

Eye contact lets students know the teacher is aware of what they are doing. Eye contact with a smile that says “thank you” will often stop problem behaviour and allow learning to continue without disruption.

Students' Names

Using students' names intentionally and positively lets them know they are not anonymous.

Be aware that a name can be spoken in any number of ways, with different intonations that communicate different messages.

You may also try including a student's name with the information or instructions being delivered. This technique gets the student's attention and lets him or her know that the teacher has noticed the behaviour.

Gestures

Simple hand or face movements can communicate a message. For example, a nod of the head means "yes," and a smile can communicate "thank you." A teacher of younger students might hold up four fingers to tell a student to keep four chair legs on the floor.

A brief touch on a student's desk or chair is a low-key way of communicating about the need to stop inappropriate behaviour. It is not always necessary to make eye contact, and the touch can be light and quick enough that other students are not likely to notice it.

Gestures can be effectively combined with proximity, eye contact, and using the student's name.

Redirecting

Sometimes simply redirecting a student from one area or activity to another area or activity will stop a problem behaviour. For example, if a student is tapping a pencil in class, you may redirect this behaviour by

- creating a diversion (e.g., "Time for a break, go and get a drink of water.")
- introducing a more appropriate replacement behaviour (e.g., Remind the student to begin the writing task.)
- removing the context that is triggering a problem behaviour (e.g., Invite the student to work with you to determine whether the student is having difficulty beginning the task.)

Pausing and Waiting

A pause can effectively draw students' attention back to the task at hand. If, after four or five seconds, the pause has not helped the students refocus, try other strategies.

Planned Ignoring

Ignoring students who engage in attention-seeking behaviour but are not interfering with teaching or learning usually causes the behaviour to stop. Carry on as if nothing has happened and avoid any indication of annoyance or frustration, which would give the student the attention he or she is seeking.

Planned ignoring of behaviour is challenging, as the inappropriate behaviour often increases before it decreases. Methods of planned ignoring include breaking eye contact, moving to another area of the classroom, and engaging in another activity. Use this strategy for minor inappropriate behaviours that do not compromise the safety or well-being of others.

In some cases, it may be necessary to coach other students on how to support this strategy by either removing themselves as an audience or following the teacher's cue to ignore a certain behaviour.

Sample Strategies to Increase the Level of the Response

If a problem behaviour continues after a teacher has tried one or two low-key responses, an increased level of response may be required.

The following steps can be used to intervene when a student is misbehaving, with minimal disruption to the class:

1. Pause.
2. Slowly turn towards the student. Stand close, make eye contact, and use a quiet voice.
3. Make a verbal request to stop. Use statements rather than questions. Frame the request positively (e.g., "Back to work, please."). Use a neutral tone and avoid lecturing. Generally use less than 10 words, but provide clear direction, kindly and firmly.
4. Make one detailed request at a time.
5. Asking twice is sufficient.
6. Remain unemotional.
7. Give the student time to respond. Counting to 10 (silently) is a good wait time.
8. Say "thank you" to verbally reinforce cooperation.

Offer Limited Choices

Providing reasonable and positive choices puts the responsibility for positive behaviour back on the student. For example, “You can work as part of a group or you can choose to work independently.”

Good choices

- are related to the problem behaviour
- are not seen as punishment
- are not delivered as ultimatums
- are offered in a positive or neutral tone
- allow for consistent follow-through

Providing limited choices

- can make difficult problems easier for students to solve
- respects students’ abilities to make decisions and gives them a sense of ownership
- helps students learn what appropriate choices are

When offering choices:

1. Stop, pause, and turn to or approach the student.
2. If possible, move to a private area where other students cannot hear the conversation.
3. Provide the student with a choice or ask him or her to make a choice. “Decide, please.”
4. Wait for a verbal or nonverbal answer. It may be a response that allows the student to save face.
5. Say “thank you.”

For example, “You must complete this math assignment, but you can choose to do the even-numbered questions or the odd-numbered ones.” Or, “You cannot push people down and take away their toys. But you can choose to apologize now or sit out until you cool off and then apologize.”

Make the choices reasonable, appropriate, and acceptable. For example, young students might have a choice between only two alternatives. “You can visit the math centre or the writing centre. Which would you prefer?” Older students can handle a broader array of choices and are better able to deal with the consequences of their decisions. For example, “Your research project is due in two weeks. What format would you like to use for it?”

Appropriate choices make sense in the context of the problem and do not cause harm.

Don’t offer options that are not equally valued by the student. “You can do your writing assignment now or you can do it at recess,” is an example of choices that may not be valued equally and may result in a power struggle.

Some students may require thinking time before deciding which choice to make. How much time is appropriate depends on the situation and the choices offered.

Ask Questions

Behaviour is more effectively changed when an adult intervenes by asking questions rather than lecturing. Sometimes asking questions encourages students to make judgments, consider consequences, and be accountable for their actions and words. Ultimately, by asking questions students learn to think for themselves and to turn mistakes into learning opportunities.

For example, ask:

- “What do you think the problem is?”
- “Is what you are doing working? Why or why not?”
- “What would happen if ...?”
- “How will you remember to ...?”

Take Time to Talk/Make an Agreement

An informal chat outside of instructional time can lead to an informal agreement. Like a number of other strategies, the informal chat shifts responsibility for the problem behaviour to the student. The adult and student discuss and develop a positive plan of action; both individuals share in the responsibility for implementing the plan. The chat can also help the adult and student to re establish a positive relationship.

To conduct an informal chat,*

- greet the student and create a positive atmosphere (Sit somewhere other than at the teacher’s desk, which can be seen as having positional power.)
- define the problem to ensure a shared understanding
- work with the student to generate alternatives
- jointly agree on an alternative to try and when to begin
- review what has been agreed upon (Ask the student to restate the agreement in his or her own words.)
- indicate to the student that you will check with her or him later to see how things are going
- end the chat with a comment or gesture that communicates a positive tone

* Adapted with permission from Barrie Bennett and Peter Smilanich, *Classroom Management: A Thinking and Caring Approach* (Toronto, ON: Brookation Inc, 1994), 291.

Create a Thinking Space

Sports teams ask for time out to bring players off the field and allow them to catch their breath, discuss a new strategy, or plan and regroup. Some students who misbehave need a time out – that is, a short break from class activities before rejoining the group. The goal is for the student to regain emotional control.

In any classroom, at any given time, students (or even teachers) may need to access a universal, quiet area to regroup or regain emotional control. In establishing this space through a classroom discussion, you can avoid the sense of isolation or singling out of students. It also allows teachers and peers to recognize when a particular student (or teacher) may need additional support.

Look for Logical Consequences

Consequences should be logically connected to the problem behaviour. For example, if students argue over a book or magazine, the item is removed and neither student gets to read it for that day. If the connection between the problem behaviour and the consequence is not obvious, the consequence probably is not logical or appropriate. Note, however, that every behaviour does not have a logical consequence, and consequences cannot solve every problem.

The following guidelines can help to ensure that students understand the consequences and that consequences are not actually “disguised punishment.”

- Plan consequences in advance, if possible.
- Choose consequences that are helpful, not hurtful.
- Focus on the future, not the past.
- Involve students in identifying and choosing logical consequences, and let them decide what consequences will be most helpful.
- Help students make the opportunity–responsibility–consequence connection by asking “what” and “how” questions.

Defuse Power Struggles

Some students who engage in power struggles are intelligent and have well-developed language skills but tend to act in their own interest and have a capacity to manipulate others and generate anger easily. Other students engage in power struggles because they have limited skills for getting what they want or for handling frustration. Power struggles can also be triggered by a lack of sleep, by hunger, or by tensions at home.

Power struggles often involve distracting the person in power by raising irrelevant side issues or by asking why. Respond to such tactics not by arguing but rather by focusing on a solution to the problem, or by giving a firm direction or choice.

Recognize a power struggle for what it is and then, if possible, ignore the student's attempt to engage in one.

A conflict requires at least two people—school staff can avoid power struggles with students by choosing not to take part in that struggle. Staff need to develop disengaging tactics for handling conflict situations in a calm, professional manner.

Sample Strategies for Disengaging from Power Struggles



- *Use a stress-reduction technique before responding to a remark or behaviour.*

Take a deep breath and release slowly. This technique can not only ground you but give you an additional moment to plan an appropriate response.

- *Use a neutral, business-like voice.*

Since people tend to interpret their emotional states from their own behavioural cues, people who speak calmly (no matter how they feel) are more likely to believe that they are calm, even in stressful situations.

- *Keep responses brief.*

Short responses prevent inadvertently rewarding defiant behaviour with too much adult attention (e.g. "I hadn't thought of that.")

Some power struggles are a result of students not being able to control their own frustration and/or anger. In some situations, it may be helpful to use well-timed, supportive techniques that "interrupt" the escalation of student anger and redirect students to activities that will create opportunities to calm down. Removing the audience can also be helpful. Individual student needs must be taken into account in determining de-escalation strategies, and may include the following: doing a quiet activity on their own, taking a break from that situation, providing a movement break, etc.



Further information on defusing power struggles is available through *Working Effectively With Violent and Aggressive States (WEVAS)* or *Non-Violent Crisis Intervention (NVC)* training.

Use Office Referrals

It is sometimes appropriate to ask a student to leave the classroom and go to the office. For this strategy to be effective, all staff in the school must understand the school-wide agreement on

- reasons for sending students to the office
- how this will be done (e.g., teachers phone the office to let the secretary know)

- what will happen when a student arrives at the office (e.g., the student is asked to sit quietly and wait for the teacher to come within 15–20 minutes to help resolve the problem, or the student is asked to complete a problem-solving sheet in a quiet, supervised area)
- the roles and responsibilities of school staff (including classroom teacher, school secretary, administrator)
- follow-up procedures (e.g., the student completes behaviour reflection sheet or the administrator phones the parents)



See **Tool 7: Behaviour Reflection** for a sample tool for students to record reflections on their behaviour.

Use Contracts

A formal contract can be used to require a student to either demonstrate positive behaviour or face a negative consequence such as the loss of privileges (e.g., participating in lunchroom programs or extracurricular activities).

Ideally, a formal contract

- is easy for all those involved to understand
- clearly and concisely identifies acceptable behaviours, unacceptable behaviours, the cueing signals the teacher will use to indicate unacceptable behaviour, and the consequences if the student chooses to engage in unacceptable behaviour
- is sensitive to the needs of the student
- identifies positive reinforcement and negative consequences
- clearly identifies who will monitor whether the contract is being followed and who will implement rewards and consequences
- may involve parents in the development and implementation of the contract terms



See **Tool 8: Behaviour Contract** for a blank sample formal contract.



See the sample behaviour contracts on pages 6.21–6.24 of *Towards Inclusion: From Challenges to Possibilities: Planning for Behaviour* (Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2001).

www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/specedu/documents.html



For more intervention ideas, see *Classroom Management for Secondary Teachers* (5th ed.) (Emmer, Evertson, and Worsham).