

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT 2020

Pupil behaviour: how to make that phone call home

It's something that fills both teachers and parents or carers with dread: the 'bad behaviour' phone call. How can you best ensure it's a constructive conversation? **Adele Bates** provides a suggested script.

This scenario can be terrifying, especially the first (hundred!) times. This article gives you practical strategies and scripts to not only deal with communicating bad news, but also to establish positive relationships moving forwards. Done skillfully, many parents and carers can become allies with you in managing their child's behaviour.

1. Take pre-emptive action

If you're reading this before you need to make that phone call... perfect!

Establishing a relationship with a parent/carer before anything negative has happened is the number one best way to help yourself if/when things go awry later.

When you meet a class, you'll soon know who *might* be the pupils to test your buttons. Find the positives about them and find any excuse to make a positive phone call home – they may expect a negative phone call, so when it's not they will (most likely) appreciate it; this will pay dividends for you in the future.

Action: aim to make three positive phone calls per week (for full-time teachers – pro rata if part-time).



2. Too late? Don't panic

If you're reading this and you need to make the phone call right now... don't despair – be ready to work concisely.

Important: for your own mental health and the success of the discussion, do not make the call if you are still wound up about the pupil. This will be heard in your voice and will be likely to evoke defensiveness from the parent/carer. If you're struggling to calm down, discuss with a mentor or colleague.

Throughout the call, remember that you are discussing the BEHAVIOUR of the pupil, not the pupil themselves.

- Introduce yourself and check that they have time to talk. Screaming siblings in the background or simultaneous driving will not be helpful.

Hello Ms/Mr [parent/carer's last name – don't say 'Sam's mum']. It's [your name] from [...] school. I'm [pupil's name] [subject/year] teacher.

There's no emergency [calm worries – unless of course it is an emergency]. I just wanted to have a chat with you about how XXX is getting on. Is now a good time?

- If it's not a good time, arrange a specific time to ring back. Otherwise, keep going.
- Start by re-capping on why the pupil has been great so far.

XX has been doing really well with term, especially the piece of work about YY. She seemed to really enjoy that and showed great YY.

- You can then use the fact you haven't been in contact as a positive thing.

Because she's been doing so well so far, I haven't been in touch. There's something that's come up though and I'd like to chat with you and get your take on it.



- As you describe the incident/s, remain impartial and curious. It may be that something is going on at home for your pupil that you are unaware of. Once when a pupil of mine came in and threw desks all over the room, I found out that the night before they had run away from home – it affects behaviour in school.

Today XX was unfortunately part of a fight with another pupil [do NOT use the other pupils' names – there may be safeguarding/outside of school ramifications]. I have the information about it from YY. I wonder if XX has mentioned it to you?

- Be sensitive; some parents/carers feel embarrassed if they don't know, so re-assure them that's normal (especially for teenagers!).

As far as I understand... [go on to describe the incident as neutrally as possible.]

- Once you've explained, give the parent/carer time to respond. Ask open-ended questions, such as:

Has this kind of thing happened before?

Do you know why they might have been angry/anxious today?

- Support the parent/carer in how they're feeling. Some may be angry, upset shocked. This may come out at you or the pupil. Either way, remember that this is not personal to you; they are absorbing negative news. Once they seem calm enough to continue, introduce consequential actions into the conversation (and make sure it is a conversation).

You might know that in the school's behaviour policy we do have to have consequences for... XX will need to [do community service, take part in a restorative justice conversation, pay for the property etc. Give details of exactly when and with whom this will happen.

- Get their opinion on the consequences.



Do you feel there's anything else that would help them realise what's gone wrong/prevent it from happening again?

The answers can be gold dust: if you discover that circle time makes them anxious, they have had previous history with other pupils etc., you can put support in accordingly.

- Thank the parent/carer, and let them know that the communication door is always open.

Thank you for supporting us in this. You can always ring us if there's things you think we should know about [give them the best person to contact in the first instance].

This can be useful. For example, if we find out a pupil has seen a biological parent for the first time in three months at the weekend, then we can adapt accordingly to how that may affect them at school.

- Follow up on any actions that you promised to. Give yourself a pat on the back.

3. Situation not resolved?

If the parent/carer is unhappy/upset/angry with you/school in regard to the consequences... find out why.

Resist the temptation to change anything at this stage.

I am sorry that you don't think that's right for this kind of behaviour [note, not the child]. Can I ask why that is?.....I cannot change anything at the moment, however I can pass your concerns onto [SLT behaviour lead] and ask them to get back to you on this.

Then meet with your line manager/SLT behaviour lead, giving as much information about the situation as possible. You may have to ring back later or they may take it from there.



4. Know your pupils

This is the key. Rob Archard, assistant head and lead on behaviour at a specialist SEMH school, says as a parent of three: 'If a teacher understands my child, and I can see that – they can say anything! That's where I start with our pupils: you have to know them.'

5. Return and repeat

Go back to the beginning and repeat step one for another pupil, ad nauseum.

Adele Bates is a teacher, speaker, writer and educator for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. With over 17 years' experience, Adele teaches pupils in a variety of educational settings, trains others to do so – in schools, universities and conferences, and advises on whole school approaches to supporting these students.