

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT 2020

Why we shouldn't ignore low-level disruptive behaviour

Behaviour management is a daily, hourly commitment. **John Dabell** explores how to promote positive behaviour and say goodbye to classroom disruption.

Serious misbehaviour can unhinge the class, you and the school. But then so can low-level behaviour, especially when it is persistent.

Ignore low-level behaviour at your peril. It's disruptive, frequently leads to a loss of learning time, has a detrimental impact on the life chances of pupils and drives teachers out of the profession. It's something Ofsted flagged up as 'deeply worrying' in its 2014 report '[Below the radar: low level disruption in the country's classrooms](#)'.

When you are in the thick of it, persistent low-level behaviour is high-stress and exhausting. It makes you and other pupils tense. It can be far from low-level if you can't get on top of it. Running a room is hard work.

What to do about it

There is certainly no shortage of behaviour management advice in education and some of it is useful. There's also a lot of gunk, muck, glop and gloop.

In his book *When the Adults Change Everything Changes* (2017), Paul Dix recommends adopting 'deliberate botheredness'. Being relentlessly bothered is characterised by establishing rapport, building emotional currency and positive relationships. Dix says that a meet and greet at the door is essential for setting the standard coupled with having clear expectations of the behaviour you want.



He recommends enforcing the rule ‘Stay on task’ as low level disruption always centres around children who roam and ramble off task. If a lesson isn’t engaging and children are bored, then expect them to wander off.

Clearly lesson content must excite children and planning for frequent changes of task is important. But as behaviour guru Tom Bennett reminds us, ‘no child will engage with work when their circumstances are chaotic, unstable or threatening.’

Bennett argues that routines are the super power of every teacher and that means ensuring children know what they are expected to do in classrooms and corridors without thinking. Routines save learning time, dissuade low level behaviour and make teaching easier.

If the expectation is ‘stay on task’ then stay on task it is, no deviation. The moment anyone goes their own way teachers have to jump in and address it.

Challenging behaviour

If behaviour isn’t challenged then pupils will carry on, more will join in and little by little it becomes part of the class culture. Learning better habits of self-regulation won’t happen if children can see you are sloppy and inconsistent. You might have seating plans and you might have your activities in place but if you allow children to talk when you are talking or allow calling out answers instead of raising a hand, for example, then you are on a road to burning out.

Low level behaviour becomes persistent because pupils can get away with it. In other words, we make the weather conditions in our classrooms and if it always feels like it is raining then we haven’t been pro-active enough.

Michael Linsin (2013) articulates this perfectly in *The Classroom Management Secret* saying that as soon ‘as you let up and relax your standards, you’re going to pay for it – with interest. The solution is to keep your foot on the gas, propelling your students toward your ever-rising bar of excellence.’



Every time we let children get away with swinging on chairs or playing with rulers we are leaving the door wide open to a 'do as you please' culture. Rob Plevin (2016) says in *Take Control of the Noisy Class* that 'the rewards are huge for the consistent teacher' and so being vigilant, owning the room and tackling problems without deviation from the game plan is crucial.

Happy teachers don't tolerate low-level disruption. They nip it in the bud early and keep a lid on it. They say what they mean and they mean what they say. They stick to the plan, follow through and maintain a positive learning environment. If talking and chatting isn't allowed, then be on it like a ton of bricks if some children decide to test the waters.

Of course, things must be in place beforehand and that means creating a classroom culture where platinum behaviour is expected. Bennet argues we should be 'conscious architects', define and shape what good behaviour is and be one-step ahead at all times.

Leadership

Teachers do not operate in silos and although every classroom has its own uniqueness, the school culture is the dominant factor in shaping what happens.

In the 2017 independent review on behaviour in schools, [Creating a Culture](#) identifies how school leaders can optimise behaviour.

- Committed headteachers
- Strong management teams with a balance of aptitudes
- A clear and detailed sense of purpose and strategy
- A robust, firm communication of that purpose and strategy
- Consistency between all staff and students about cultural and academic norms



- Close attention to detail
- Well-advertised, repeatedly demonstrated routines in every aspect of civil and academic conduct
- A commitment to staff development
- Highly visible leadership
- Behaviour policies that are a continual focus in every aspect of school strategy and planning
- A commitment to every student's wellbeing and success
- A focus by senior staff on supporting the most challenging students appropriately

The message of the report is that schools in all circumstances can achieve high standards of behaviour with visible school leaders who are role models with ambition, vision, optimism and a steely nerve.

When school leaders treat behaviour seriously, tackle it pro-actively and set the culture, this offers children self-respect, confidence and the feeling that they belong and their classrooms need and appreciate them.

Bootcamp

Culture is king and every teacher has to be a cultural ambassador for the school's values and beliefs. Those that don't sing the school's mantra are going to come unstuck and throw a spanner in the works. Everything and everyone has to calibrate.

In order to set the scene and tone, some schools adopt a habit-forming bootcamp to set high expectations and enforce codes of conduct.



Curriculum content is put to one side in the first week of term and the school culture becomes the focus. This enables everyone to 'get it' and pupils soon learn that teachers are uncompromising in their expectations and never settle for lower standards of behaviour. They understand that the school has a fair but firm behaviour policy in place and know it will be implemented rigorously by staff and consistently applied.

This is time well invested because it creates calm and positive atmospheres in class, builds strong relationships and lets children know that there is no messing about.

And finally...

Classroom management doesn't have to be complicated and low-level behaviour shouldn't be part of any teacher's daily battle. Get the systems right and this will free you to teach and making every lesson count.

If low-level disruption comes your way, push it right back and do it swiftly to let everyone know that you are no pushover.

John Dabell trained as a teacher 20 years ago, starting his career in London and then teaching in a range of schools in the Midlands. In-between teaching jobs, he trained as an Ofsted inspector and worked as a national in-service provider, project manager, writer and editor. He has written many educational books and children's books.