

Case Studies

HELP FILE

Attention Seeking

"I teach a Grade 1/2 class and one of my students has a behaviour issue. He is very bright, but a perfectionist. At times he will throw a tantrum (pretend crying, yelling), over insignificant issues like not having a pencil. Instead of thinking rationally and going to get himself a pencil he will make a scene.

He distracts others at his table, so I often have to move him. His mum is concerned that this is seen as a punishment. I explained to her that it wasn't fair for the other children if they couldn't get their work done. Even after moving him though, little work is done. I would appreciate it if you could help me with this.

He is an attention seeker and will constantly call out and say silly things so that the other children will laugh. I have been ignoring some of this behaviour. When it doesn't affect the other children and I have been incorporating some of your Stop, Think, Do programme.

I was just wondering if you have any suggestions, particularly when he throws a tantrum? It is also very difficult to get him to do any work."

Jenny Replied

This reminds me of the old saying that when all of us were very young we believed that our mother was our own personal intimate possession, that we were the centre of the universe, and that everything in the world belonged to us.

But that aside, this child obviously has difficulty when things don't go his way which in his case triggers a particularly high level of frustration leading to tantrums. He doesn't know how to deal with things when he can't get what he wants.

When facing a child like this and at this young age, the key is to teach him "what to do when". For example when he doesn't have a pencil, (translate: when he can't get his own way?). We think children should know what to do – but they don't and their behaviour is reactive until they are taught, - emotion just overwhelms them.

Dealing with frustration is a learned behaviour, – so I suggest you sit with him when he is receptive and draw an egg for him, – children are very concrete in their learning at this stage and you can use the drawing to explain what happens to him when for example he cannot find his pencil, (and other things).

The principle behind the strategy is to try and replace the disruptive behaviour with behaviour that is acceptable. What follows is only an example. You must adapt the principle to the situation and your knowledge of the boy. The new behaviour you suggest to him must have a reward component. This can be a sweet, a star on his work or simply your approval, as in the example below.

I often use this "egg" analogy in his age group; tell him his feelings rise to the top of his egg which causes it to fall over. Then explain that there is a way he can keep his "egg" in balance; which will make people like him more, ---- draw the egg and

show it wobbling, falling over and then cracking so that he understands what happens to him when he gets frustrated. Then give him the following steps to help him 'keep his egg straight' (in balance).

Tell him that when he **begins** to get frustrated and angry or feels the need to make a joke etc., to remember the egg and to follow these steps, -

- Immediately say to himself, "My egg is going to fall over".
- I must now (e.g.), get up and go to the special box for pencils and choose one.
- Then I must (e.g.), go back to my seat and use my pencil.
- When (e.g.), I have finished / at end of day I put the pencil back.

Then when you see him doing this go over to him and say "well done" and quietly ask him if there's a problem.

Alternatively you could simply reward him for a whole period of quiet work.

Part of his difficulty may be insecurity (which later may become low self esteem), as shown by what may be his need to have the other children approve him by laughing at his jokes, so the positive feedback you give for alternative behaviours will help this if it is a factor.

The frustration that builds up prevents him from thinking rationally – a pretty tall ask for a young child anyway. We have to teach children, primarily through our own example but it also works if we teach them to do it for themselves step by step, as above.

I notice that he is bright and may also just be a naturally extrovert personality, so ignoring is a quite appropriate strategy for you to use but you could also try and build him up a bit by giving him little responsibilities around the classroom, – where he is acknowledged and affirmed, – this is a good balance to ignoring him when you feel you should. Sometimes you might like to respond differently and laugh together with the others if he makes a really witty or funny joke. It always helps to act differently, remembering we don't laugh at but with – ie sharing together – he could become great fun to have in your class!

We often have to lure children into learning – you could ask him some interesting and challenging questions which cause him to think and really listen. Then acknowledge his responses – our tendency is to focus on the misbehaviour – "brush them off" and miss wonderful learning opportunities.

May I just share a little story? – I was once assisting with Preps and noticed a little blonde chap but whenever I saw him his face had that screwed up look. I watched him and saw that he didn't work much and that he distracted others. Passing by his table at one point I asked him just to put his answers on the sheet of paper he had. A few minutes later I saw him crush up the worksheet and throw it under the

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desk. So at an appropriate time I went and sat next to him and asked him to tell me the answers to the questions. I was bowled over by his responses, -- he was so fast and all the answers were correct and suddenly there was a bright smiling face looking up at me with real pleasure at being acknowledged that he could do it. But after I had moved away he added nothing to the new blank worksheet I'd given him.

I had also noticed a feat of "engineering" which he had started and had got some other boys involved in. Someone might have said it was a mess but I watched carefully and saw that it was an intricately planned balance of pencils and boxes and rulers etc. He was doing this instead of "working", he actually never wrote anything at all, - a problem in its own right.

The relevance of this story for your little chap is that all "misbehaviour" is a message and he needs help in some way or other or you are likely to lose him and end up with a major behaviour problem. Your instinct is right to wonder what is happening here and to ask yourself questions and to ask for help. Don't ignore your instinct to question further when a child is not achieving and so often misbehaving. You know there is something happening here and so does his Mum ...

Jenny Mackay