

## Behaviour Strategies

### HELP FILE

#### Refusal, Disruptive and Unruly Class

These are interesting behaviours which are related because they are often unwittingly triggered by the teacher. Once visiting a class of young children I had a youngster whom I shall call "Jason."

Jason was extremely difficult to manage, he would shout or laugh louder than the rest and was unruly in everything. He would make uglier faces than anyone else and would want to kill everything - he would say it, he would want to draw it, and he wantonly scribbled all over his work. If I asked him to do something he would say "NO!" before there was any real acknowledgement for what I had asked. If I went to pat him on the shoulder in acknowledgement he would recoil and immediately pull away with a, "Don't you touch me", angry look. I also noticed that he seemed to respond better to men than to women.

I wanted to respond angrily to him but realised that his unacceptable behaviour could be in response to previous actions. Somewhere he had learned to respond in this way and it had almost become automatic. With a young child, I would think perhaps even self-protective.

How was I to change this once I had realised I was sparking these negative and aggressive responses? I totally changed my approach:

- Although he did not at first greet or acknowledge me I continued to bid him good morning as I did other children when they entered the classroom individually. His improvement was almost unnoticeable at first. Each step he took was minutely small - at first totally ignoring me, to just noticing, to a verbal grunt, to a word, to an open greeting - all over time. Eventually he mumbled a "Good afternoon", greeting.
- I made a point of not patting him on the shoulder when acknowledging him after he had done well in something: my acknowledgements were verbal and I maintained a certain space between us. Again, each step was very small but his responses started to change and so did his involvement in his work. The quickest response came verbally in classroom discussions etc.
- I also focused on him when he was "doing the right thing" - I would "catch him doing it right", and tended to ignore silly behaviours.
- I corrected only when vitally necessary - this correction was generally a quietly repeated statement e.g. sit down, sit down, sit down - never raising my voice but quietly and

firmly repeating the statement - (like a broken record), - it was vitally important not to get hooked into his "games" - quite difficult, but vital that he receive the message that I was not accepting his "bad" behaviour.

- Otherwise I generally ignored the behaviour, and if a member of the class mentioned his behaviour I acknowledged them saying that I would, "speak with Jason", when he was behaving "nicely" like the rest of you, which I did. I needed the class to know that I was managing his behaviour even if he wasn't.
- Also, when he wasn't quite getting it right, I focused on him with a positive expectation e.g. when he was working a little noisily, I would say, "I can see Jason is working hard", and he would immediately settle down. With the positive focus he tended to become more involved in class activities, discussions etc., and was acknowledged when acceptable etc., just as the others were.

*I realized his behaviour was not to get at me, it was a reaction to me as an authority figure, and I needed to change this reaction into something with which we could both work. In my class he needed to see himself differently; as someone who was able, valued and trusted, and not as the 'class disruptor and general irritant', - which was alienating not only me but also his classmates.*

### **Observation and Comment**

Something which commonly happens and which occurred when I started changing my responses to Jason, is that there were times when he reverted and acted quite badly. I see this as limit-testing behaviour, very common with adolescents, and quite normal. I always remained firm and stayed consistent in my responses even though the behaviours got worse at times, (before they got better). It is vitally important that you 'remain calm under fire', stay with what you know is right, and maintain consistency in your all your responses. After all, the behaviour has been this way for some years, so it isn't going to change overnight, and more importantly, you are inviting a new relationship based on mutual respect, and this takes time.

Sadly I was only with Jason for a short time. I would have liked the opportunity to see the relationship grow. No doubt it would not have been smooth sailing by any means, quite rocky at times, because he was going home to something different, about which I knew little, but that wasn't really important from my point of view as the home situation was not within my realm of responsibility and there would be little one could do about it. (This is particularly true if parents are not willing to work with teachers on behaviour issues).

The important thing for me as Jason's teacher was the relationship that I could build with him; enabling me to teach him and giving him the opportunity of discarding his irritating persona.

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