

## Case Studies

### HELP FILE

#### Intense 'Me First' Behaviour

Hi. I've read an article you wrote and have been trying the techniques - actually I found out I was doing them anyway. However, after several weeks of school one particular child is becoming a barrier to other students' learning opportunities. I'm wearing thin and it is showing.

This is a boy in a Prep classroom. We have a few common tables and no desks. The children can choose where they sit. Because of table grouping I am constantly on the move between groups.

When we sit on the carpet he pushes up to the front of the group and yells out all of the time. I've tried 'catching' him doing the right thing - I think I've managed about twice in 3 months. His behaviour seems to get worse when I praise him for being good.

Nothing seems to work; showing anger, time out, praise, ignoring etc. He pushes his friends over to get at things, to get to the front of the line, to sit at the front of the group, to go to the toilet, to hold the hand of the teacher aid. There is nothing that means enough to him to use as a reward or as a sanction.

When he is removed from the room he has a tantrum. I can't think of a time when he has worked well that I could capitalise on and build on.

I've not been able to get much help. He was interviewed once but nothing came of it.

Any suggestions?

#### Jenny replied

Glad to hear from you. This is intense 'me first' behaviour and in an adult would be called self-centeredness or even narcissism. These phrases don't apply at all because the child is very young and still developing and in all likelihood will outgrow the behaviour. This doesn't help you now.

What's causing the behaviour is anyone's guess but one thing is certain, he has a very fragile sense of self and he needs constant external reinforcement that he is important.

Now let me generalise: As a Prep teacher, one of the most important things is to understand that each one of these young ones just want to be loved - acknowledged, feel safe and secure in your class. If they feel cared about - you take away most of their need to act out .. to misbehave. Along with this, these young children come to school behaving in ways that work for them and often you have to firmly but gently teach them that in school you behave differently to how you behave at home, but you know this. What would seem to be the difficulty is in the actual interactions everyone but especially you, have with this child.

Please remember I can only generalise as I do not know your situation or the child involved - you must take what you feel will work best for you and this child. But the following should be helpful.

1. Take a small notepad and split the page in half. Write down all the behaviours that this child elicits - the problem ones in one column and the positives in the other (even zero negative behaviour would be a positive in his case.)
2. On the positive - write down anything that you like or see him do that is helpful / positive ... even to how he comes to school etc. When you have done this - acknowledge his strengths - describing what he does, says or even how he looks e.g. nice to see you smiling today - you must be feeling happy. You have brought your books and pens today - I am looking forward to some excellent work. I liked seeing you help "...." he was glad of your help ... comments like these he can affirm him to himself - enabling him to feel he is both valued and able ... important for self worth.
3. In the other column prioritise your list of behaviours that he needs to learn to do differently and then take the one you need least for him to get right and plan how to best enable him to do this ...
  - e.g. you may take him aside and say .... when we sit on the carpet and I hear you shouting out ... I am concerned. We do not do that in this class. What do you think you can do instead of shouting out? ... if you are able to engage him in this way he will be able to suggest things, or the two of you could plan what he can do - he must make the final decision - this is important for his cooperation.
  - You may like to suggest a secret code between you. When you hear his shouting out you will for example put your finger on your lips and look at his own lips which will mean for him to put his hand up instead.
  - You have to train him to take control of his behaviour .... and then when he gets it right - he can put a tick in his book every time he does and show them to you at the end of the day having counted up how many ticks he got that day.
  - When he has got the idea and doing it quite well - remember your 100% will not be theirs and that's okay, then go on to the next behaviour and work on it together until he gets it right.
4. As he sees he is able to do this and you are pleased and not irritated / grumpy ... he will become more cooperative as he won't need your affirmation (attention), as much. But the key lies not so much in what he does but how you manage him and at this age you are teaching all these little ones how to behave. There is no need to get cross with them (if you do), you may be a bit cross for not yet solving this yourself, and if that is so, just plan your interventions with him and don't deviate from them or over react to him.

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5. Just out of interest have you given him a hug? When working with parents whose child continually whinges and irritates the fastest way to stop this is to give them a great big warm hug and hold them close until they push you away ... this little boy may reflect a little of that behaviour - he may be begging for it. But also I feel he needs a firm but caring and quietly spoken word when he steps over the boundaries. Enable him to learn to behave ... remember it is all in your response ... he will respond according to your way of speaking and working with him. Be quiet, firm and caring.

Build his resilience by engaging him in ways that calm him and allow him to work as well as the others. If the foregoing is not helpful you will have to learn from *him* how to do that! Keep trying new ways of engaging him, his responses will inform you.

**Jenny Mackay**