**Problem behavior**

Behavior problems at school interfere with lessons and disturb other students. These problems often overwhelm teachers, particularly novices, and some consider them the most difficult aspect of a teacher’s work day. Children who exhibit behavior problems invariably require extra attention, which places strain on teachers and slows the pace at which lessons are offered and completed.

**Sensory Processing Disorder**  
Children with sensory processing disorder can be disruptive in the classroom because they are unable to keep pace with daily lessons. They might walk around or talk at inappropriate times, and their special needs divert the teacher’s attention from the set program. Children with this disorder find it difficult to organize and make sense of the sensory information that their brain receives from the world around them. Normal activities can seem confusing and overwhelming to them. They often have problems learning and prefer not to play with classmates during recess.

**Aggressive Students**  
Aggressive behavior is a serious problem and is disruptive to a supportive and safe learning environment. Physical aggression can be violent, even between young students, and both pupils might get hurt. Aggression between students in the classroom or playground disrupts all other activities and negatively affects teachers and other students. Apart from the initial disruption, the after-effects of physical fighting remain with sensitive pupils and interfere with their school day.

**Inappropriate Language**  
Although fairly commonplace in the classroom, inappropriate language does not belong in school and is offensive to many students and teachers. Students may use foul language to impress their classmates or to get the attention of their teacher. Some students use inappropriate language to express frustration or anger, while others use this type of language because it is normal in their home environment. In all cases, teachers should dissuade students from swearing in either the classroom or on the playground.

**Inattentive Students**  
Inattentive students tend to fall behind their classmates unless appropriate steps are taken. In certain cases, students may suffer from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which causes them to have difficulty controlling their behavior. These students experience difficulty in organizing school work and sustaining attention. They struggle with starting projects, and even simple school tasks can overwhelm them. These children often require extra attention from teachers, so normal school lessons take longer to complete, and students without learning or other behavior problems become bored and frustrated.

# Five Persistent Behavior Problems and How to Handle Them

If student behavior problems have you frustrated, rest assured that you are not the only new teacher who feels this way. It comes with the job description . . . even seasoned professionals sometimes have trouble quieting talkative types, avoiding power struggles, and redirecting overly demanding students.

For help with reining in difficult behavior, the New Teacher Survival Guide tapped the expertise of behavior management expert Bill Rogers, author of *Behavior Management: A Whole-School Approach*. He has identified five especially tricky classroom personalities and devised strategies for handling them. Use these strategies to maintain better control and establish a calmer, more productive atmosphere for you and all your students.

**The Chatterbox**

What can you do about the student who distracts others with nonstop talking?

* **Give a positive direction or reminder, followed by "thanks."** For example, "Emma, Lisa, facing this way and quiet, thanks!" The key, says Rogers, is to focus on the desired behavior rather than the misbehavior. And using "thanks" rather than "please," even when correcting, communicates your expectation that the students will comply, he adds.
* **Try a strategic pause.** A pause communicates the expectation that students look toward you, listen, and subsequently respond. Even if you call a misbehaving student's name, says Rogers, try a pause before giving a positive direction or reminder so the student has time to focus.
* **Keep the focus on the primary issue by knowing how to redirect.** Frequently, students who are singled out will argue or sulk, which is secondary to the primary issue of their disruptive talking. "Don't get drawn into these secondary issues," Rogers cautions. You can briefly acknowledge the student's feelings, then quickly shift focus back to the primary issue. For example, "But we were only talking about the work," argues the student. "Maybe you were, but I want you to face the front and listen, thanks. You'll need to know this stuff," responds the teacher, redirecting the focus to continuing the lesson.;

**The Boycotter**

Sometimes students simply refuse to do their work, pulling teachers into a power struggle. If this happens:

* **Give students a choice — with consequences attached.** For example, "If you choose not to do the work now, you will need to do it during free time." Rogers explains that using the word "choose" or "choice" is important because students need to understand that they have control over how they behave. Their behavior is their responsibility.
* **Provide take-up time.** This refers to the time students have to respond to corrective discipline. If you turn briefly to respond to another student or survey the room, this gives the student a chance to save face while complying, and it eliminates a prolonged confrontation.
* **Reestablish the relationship.** After a student has complied, a simple smile or positive comment reassures the student that you aren't holding a grudge and his or her relationship with you is still secure.

**The Debater**

This student challenges everything a teacher says or does. With him or her, every small primary issue escalates into several major secondary ones.

* **Distinguish between primary and secondary behavior.** A student's words, tone of voice, body language, and "attitude" often distract us from the original, often minor infraction. For example, "Bradley, I notice that you haven't started. Any problems?" the teacher asks politely. "Yeah, well, I haven't got a pen, have I?" Bradley snarls in reply. Try to ignore this secondary behavior in the heat of the moment.
* **Avoid unnecessary power struggles.** It's tough not to overreact and get defensive when a student's attitude and body language are hostile. But overreaction only extends the conflict, warns Rogers. Instead, remain assertive, but civil, and redirect the student to the primary issue.
* **Plan a follow-up.** While it usually works better to ignore secondary behavior in the heat of the moment, plan an after-class discussion with students who habitually exhibit such behavior. Explain what their secondary behavior sounds and looks like, and how it affects your working relationship.

**The Sulker**

Like the debater, the sulker's secondary behavior is usually worse than the primary problem. Schedule an after-class chat. A private discussion helps the student to understand that the habitual secondary behavior is unacceptable. Such chats, says Rogers, are most effective early in the year to "nip in the bud" the problem and send the message that you will always follow up on such behavior.

* **Time your invitation effectively.** Inform the student of an after-class chat just before the recess bell, or just before class ends. That avoids any prolonged discussion of "What have I done?"
* **Keep your presentation positive.** Teachers must correct and guide students in a positive and friendly manner. Avoid threatening body language or tone of voice, Rogers advises. A pleasant demeanor will help repair strained relationships.
* **Offer to mirror the problem behavior.** Many students don't see their behavior as teachers do. Their poor social skills, bad habits, and gambits for attention come across as rudeness, even if they don't necessarily mean to be rude. In a friendly, unthreatening manner, demonstrate the postures, gestures, and tone of voice the student uses, then explain: "I don't speak like that to you. When you speak like that, it shows disrespect because of the tone and the way you say it." Explain how such behavior affects working relationships.

**The Clinger**

This dependent student rarely does anything without demanding the teacher's immediate help and attention. To wean him or her of this dependency:

* **Start with tactical ignoring.** Keep the focus on the lesson, or on acknowledging and reinforcing students who follow the rules and ask for help at appropriate times. For example, while you are conferring with one student, ignore the student who is interrupting and asking you to look at his paper right now. When he sits down and waits quietly (maybe after a reminder), go to him enthusiastically, reinforcing his improved behavior.
* **Combine simple directions and reminders with hand signals.** "Hands up without calling out, thanks," or "Please wait your turn." Well-established hand signals are effective, too, such as blocking hand to signal that a student should wait.
* **Give students alternatives.** An established routines such as, "Ask three before you ask me," works in many situations, Rogers suggests. In other words, students should ask three peers before seeking your help. Encourage students to help each other, turning to you for help only as a last resort.

**This article was adapted from *Learning to Teach...Not Just for Beginners: The Essential Guide for All Teachers* by Linda Shalaway, © 2005, published by Scholastic.**