



**REMAIN CALM & RESPOND RIGHT  
WHEN A STUDENT CHALLENGES!**

By

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## RESPONDING TO MISBEHAVIOR

It's been said that "the best offense is a good defense." Probably nowhere is this truer than when it comes to classroom management. Prevention is a key ingredient in classroom management, and the more preventative maintenance that can be done through the use of proactive strategies, the less likely teachers will be to encounter problem behavior. But even the most well run classrooms will experience problems from time to time. For some teachers, behavior problems in the classroom will be a common occurrence or even a daily "routine" that results from the growing "culture of disrespect" that has progressively infiltrated our schools. For others, discipline problems may be rare, occurring only in unusual circumstances or situations. But regardless of their frequency, we know they are bound to occur.

When challenging behavior does occur, teachers must be equipped with the necessary tools to handle such challenges in a professional, mutually respectful way that still holds offending students accountable while minimizing disruptions to learning. This is a tall order, but it can be achieved in all but the most extreme circumstances through the use of some very powerful reactive strategies.

In all cases, a proper response to misbehavior begins early on in the chain of events. Teachers must commit to dealing with behavior problems when they occur by first evaluating the nature or threat of the behavior to student learning and then by responding appropriately. Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional, and with prompt attention paid to emergent misbehavior through early intervention strategies, up to ninety percent of minor, pesky behavior problems can be eliminated in the classroom

## CHALLENGING MISBEHAVIOR

### Maintain Self-Control

The first type of minor problem we will address is the most egregious -- when a student directly and openly challenges a teacher in front of the rest of the class (e.g., "Why do we have to do this? This is boring!"). Essential to successfully managing challenging behavior is the ability to first maintain self-control in the heat of the battle. Losing control and responding in anger or emotional outbursts is not only unprofessional, it results in a loss of respect for you as a teacher from your students and brings you down to the offending student's level. You lose all credibility, and your power and authority are compromised. Losing self-control equates to losing control of your classroom. It is a signal to your students that you are no longer "running the show."

Maintaining your self-control when confronted with disrespectful or defiant behavior is, of course, easier said than done. However, like most skills, it is a learned behavior that can be acquired through habitual practice. Ironically, then, to improve self-control, many teachers will need increased opportunities for practice. Challenges should, therefore, be viewed as opportunities for you to shine. They are opportunities to demonstrate by word, or silence, and deed that you are the adult, in charge, calm, and assured, even though you may not be feeling any of these things at the moment! These "tough" students are giving

you the opportunity to perfect your craft. ☺ Take them up on it. Practice the strategies suggested below and use student challenges to your authority as a way to learn how to become inoculated against them. For some teachers this will require a paradigm shift in their thinking.

### **Remain Calm: “Calm is Contagious,” and “Silence is Powerful.”**

The first step in maintaining self-control is to remain calm. When faced with disrespectful or challenging behavior, do not immediately react. Instead, take a deep breath to help you relax and remain silent, at least initially. If you overreact, then thirty students have just witnessed how to set you off, which virtually guarantees that they will try it again. Plus, students tend to stick together, and not support you publicly during challenges. It’s not “cool” to defend the teacher, so when you take on one student, you may be taking on the entire class.

Remaining calm does not mean we are going to ignore the problem either, for if you ignore it, then thirty students have just witnessed you back down and relinquish your authority. We are not going to ignore the problem or overreact-- both of which result in a loss of control and authority -- but respond correctly in action and timing. In order to do this, we must first be calm and have a clear mind to think.

### **Wait: Model Cognition**

The second step is simply to wait calmly and silently, while you assume a supportive stance (i.e., stand askance or sideways to the student who is challenging you) and “model cognition” (i.e., act like you are thinking). To do this, stand with one hand on your chin, perhaps while tapping your index finger to make it look like you are thinking. Experts in crisis abatement suggest all of these body positions. They are supportive, non-confrontational, and most importantly, signal your willing determination without escalating or adding any more tension to an otherwise volatile situation. You are in effect saying, “I am here. I am not afraid, nor should you be. I am an adult, and I can take care of this,” all without saying a word.

The act of simply waiting, combined with a supportive stance, often solves the problem without the teacher ever having to say a word. Teachers have reported experiences where the silent period (usually lasting only 5-9 seconds) causes the child to throw up his hands in defeat and say something like, “Fine. I’ll do it even though it’s dumb!” and storm back to his seat. In such instances, further escalation was avoided, and the teachers maintained their authority. Teachers can then later address the student’s response on their own terms at a later time (e.g., recess-- when it is inconvenient for the student) and set effective limits (see below).

When questioned, some students reported that during the silent period, they were convinced that their teacher was conjuring up a “HUGE CONSEQUENCE,” when in reality the teacher was simply trying to remain calm and wondering, “What in the world should I do?” In other words, the teacher’s calm demeanor dictated an outcome that was beneficial to him or her and to the student. While the student was viewing his or her teacher as “large and in charge,” the teacher was scrambling for a response, and the “wait time” bought the break needed for the student to back down— and for the teacher to shine.

Your “silence is golden,” and it works for you on all fronts. Your percipient nature looks “strong and comforting” to your pupils. You appear in control and to be developing a measured response by modeling cognition in supportive stance. You have not taken the debate bait. Silence buys you all of this, and it costs nothing!

## AVOIDING POWER STRUGGLES – IS EASY!

*“Conflict is Inevitable, Combat is Optional.”*

It is important in challenging exchanges to avoid getting caught up in power struggles. Again, not only is this unprofessional, but it reduces your credibility, erodes your authority, and lessens your control over the situation by lowering you to the offending student’s level. Plus, it tends to make volatile situations worse by adding more fuel to the fire, and then the inevitable “blow-up” occurs as the unbearable limit is reached, transforming a minor problem into a serious, threatening one. You want to diffuse the situation, not exacerbate it. In order to do this, it helps to first be prepared for the possible exchanges that may occur. Student challenges typically fall into one of four basic categories:

- Past history (e.g., “Mr. Smith never made us do it that way.”)
- Defending credibility (e.g., “You’re boring;” “This is boring, why do we have to do this anyway?”)
- Button pushing (e.g., “My father says the two easiest jobs are a teacher and a preacher.”)
- Threats and ultimatums (e.g., “Go ahead, you’ll pay;” “Make me go to the office!”)

## DIFFUSERS...TRY THEM!

In many cases, you can diffuse challenging exchanges with a simple one or two word response (e.g., “I’m sorry,” “I understand,” “Probably so,” “Nevertheless”). These four simple phrases or “diffusers,” as we call them, provide a powerful way to deter or derail student challenges. They should be delivered matter-of-factly, without skipping-a-beat in your instruction. For example, if a student says, “This is boring,” the teacher simply replies, “I’m sorry,” or “Nevertheless” and continues teaching without interruption. There is no need to engage the student further at the time of the exchange.

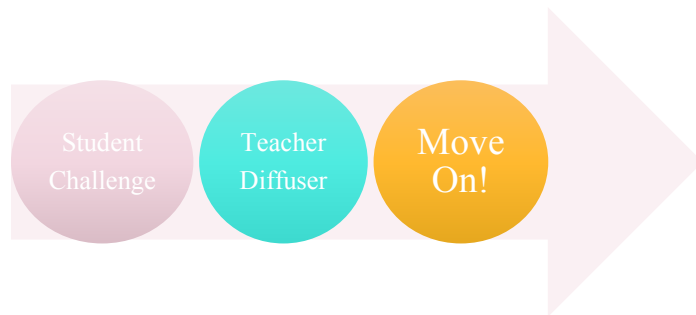
Then later, when it is convenient for the teacher, the student can be pulled aside, spoken to, and receive a consequence, if appropriate.

## HERE IS A SMALL LIST OF DIFFUSERS FOR YOU TO TRY!

- I see that
- Good point

- Perhaps
- I feel you
- I understand your point
- Regardless
- Thank you for your observation
- You'll find out shortly
- Wait it gets better
- Huh
- That's interesting
- Yea
- Oh
- Fantastic
- Noted
- We certainly did
- I'll keep that in mind
- I understand where you're coming from
- I like the way you're thinking
- Oh your thinking
- Really
- Maybe so
- Oh snap
- Um okay
- So it is
- We'll check later
- I guess so
- Hold that thought
- I can smell what you're cooking
- Okay
- Interesting
- Still
- Just the same
- In the mean time

- Alright
- Fine
- I hear you
- Acknowledged
- Got it
- Moving on
- Duly noted
- That's another way to look at it
- Sorry you feel that way
- We can talk at recess
- We'll talk later
- Thanks for letting me know
- Thanks for sharing
- See your point
- I empathize
- That's right
- Love your thought process
- I appreciate your point of view
- Bummer
- Let the record show
- Think about it
- That's possible
- Right!
- Aha
- Good to know
- Roger



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## THE ART OF DIFFUSING

Great teachers routinely diffuse challenges to teach well and also to divert attention away from certain hot spots or potential problem areas.

Timing is everything. When confrontation or negative behavior is beginning to create a disturbance, focusing the class's attention and/or the student's attention on the task at hand and not the challenge can reduce or eliminate the problem – both in the moment and also from happening again! This mental distraction provides opportunity for the student to give up the negative behavior without him or her knowing they have done so. Best of all the teacher has not missed a beat and instruction continues.

**USE DIFFUSERS TO DISRUPT THE DISRUPTER!**