

Tips for Managing the Middle School Classroom

*“When annoyed, count to 10 before you speak;
If very annoyed, count to 100.”
Thomas Jefferson*

The ways in which we respond to a disruptive behavior often determines whether the situation escalates or not. Teachers should be aware of the fine balancing act required when dealing with a student who is off-task. You never want to let a student stop instruction or disrupt the productivity of the entire class, but you also don't want to let an off-task behavior go unaddressed – *particularly* in the beginning of the school year. Use some of the techniques below to diffuse disruptive behavior or situations.

Ask Reflective Questions

With a calm and positive body language, ask questions when dealing with misbehavior:

- What are you supposed to be doing right now?
- It appears you are having trouble staying on task. How can I help you?
- I've noticed that you are having difficulty being an active listener. Would it assist you if I switch your seat to another location in the room?

Calling Students to Attention

Trying to yell over (or at) students that have gotten a bit out of hand or overly engaged in an activity can be exhausting and send the message that you have lost control. Instead, without raising your voice, keeping it just at the volume you would use to speak, say: “If you can hear me, clap once.” Wait for the sound of a clap and repeat the statement. As more students hear the claps, they will stop what they are doing and join in. Follow-up with, “If you can hear me clap twice.” It should take no more than 2-3 statements for you to have the attention of all students.

Teachers alternatively may choose to use a call and response to gain students' attention. For example, students can be trained that when they hear the teacher say “Sawa Bona” (a common greeting among tribes in northern Natal in South Africa which means ‘I see you’) they will stop what they are doing and reply “Sikhona” (which means, “I am here”).

Another option is to identify a silent signal that you will use to let students know it's time to stop what they are doing and listen. Ask them to also perform the signal when they see you doing it. Such a signal can be as easy as holding an arm straight up in the air. When students notice this, they should stop what they are doing, be silent, and mirror the signal. As students notice the teacher, or one another, holding their arm in the air, the class will grow quiet.

Change It Up

Albert Einstein defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” If you feel students are not paying attention or are unengaged in the lesson, make a small change. For example, if a class discussion isn't working, instruct students to move into pairs or small groups to brainstorm or discuss. If students seem lethargic, have them all stand up, stretch, and verbalize an exaggerated yawn. If students seem anxious about something (i.e. a pending test) have them take some deep breaths. If a lesson isn't working, ask students what you can do to help them get back on track. The most important thing is to make a change, whether minuet or substantial; things will not improve continuing on the same unsuccessful course.

Chat About It Later

It is important to never let one student disrupt the lesson for the entire class. If the behavior isn't causing a huge distraction, it might be best to wait and discuss it with the student at a natural stopping point (i.e. when the class begins independent work). For example, "Jasmine, did you notice you were tapping your pencil over and over again during class today? It's a bit distracting, so would you mind trying to be aware of that and not doing it tomorrow?" If it's a repeated behavior, you might want to work out a signal with the student to point out the behavior to him/her that you both agree on ahead of time. For example, "Josh, thanks for being honest about how you have a hard time concentrating after lunch. How about when I notice that you are off task, I'll walk by and tap on your desk lightly?"

Choices

When an expectation is violated by a student in such a way that a consequence is in order, discipline with choice. For example, if a student has been consistently tardy, you might say, "You add a lot of value to this class and we need you here on time. As you know we are only allowed two tardies, so you have a choice. You can serve one day of after school detention, or you can choose to take two days of silent lunch. What is your choice?" This less punitive way of speaking still results in a consequence, but puts the student in a situation where he/she still feels respected while being disciplined, thus reducing the likelihood of an argument.

Divert

If a particular student is off-task or disruptive, divert his/her attention in a non-confrontational manner by giving him/her a job to do (such as taking notes on chart paper or being a "volunteer" in a demonstration).

Don't Take it Personally!

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when dealing with student misbehavior (and also the easiest thing to forget) is to not take it personally. Remember that there are a multitude of influences impacting the children we teach and the way they act. Not to mention, the very nature of many middle school students involves testing authority. Refrain from engaging in power struggles with your students. Don't allow yourself to lose control, become angry, and get into a shouting match. Try to remain unemotional and remind yourself to not take children's actions to heart.

Dramatic Expression

If you have built a relationship with your students, you can often implore humor to address distractions. Making an exaggerated expression of frustration or warming (i.e. widening your eyes and pursing your lips, followed by a smile) can often get a student back on task, and even have them smiling while doing so.

Encourage and Acknowledge

Once a student is back on task, or if a student who is typically disruptive has a positive moment, acknowledge this in private. It is important to find an improvement a student has made and congratulate them for it – this will encourage progress.

Eye Contact

Try and make eye contact with a student who is off task or being disruptive. Once they see that you are aware of what they are doing, they will often refocus.

Ground Rules

Remind students that they collectively created and agreed to the "Community Expectations." Thus, students share the responsibility of dealing with unproductive behavior. If students help abide by and reinforce expectations, the teacher's job becomes easier and the classroom is more conducive for learning. A simple phrase like, "Let's remember our Community Expectations" or "Don't forget what you set forth in the Class Constitution" can be a signal that the teacher uses, or students use with one another, as a gentle reminder when someone is doing something distracting. Sometimes a reference to the class expectations is all that is needed to

curtail whatever unproductive behavior is taking place. The key is to be consistent in enforcing the expectations; otherwise students will view you as unfair.

“I” Messages

Teach students how to communicate during conflicts using “I messages.” An “I-statement” is format for sharing your feelings about a situation without accusing the other person, which can result in defensiveness and power struggles. The format for “I messages” is simply: I feel _____ when you _____ because _____. This manner of speaking can also be helpful when teachers are addressing students directly. For example: “Jackie, the other students and I feel distracted when you get up in the middle of a lesson to sharpen your pencil, because it makes a lot of noise. Could you start sharpening your pencils before class begins?”

Mediation

When two students have an issue with one another, it is important to address it so that it does not escalate. Meet with the two students privately. Let the students know that both of them will have the chance to tell each of their sides of the story without being interrupted. Have each child tell what the problem is and what occurred during the conflict. (Teachers may want to encourage the students to use “I messages” when sharing their side. See above description.) Help the students develop some possible solutions and choose one to implement. Once resolved, ask the students if they can think of more effective choices they could have made.

Names

It is important to use your student’s names when you want to address a behavior or encourage them to act in a certain way. By using their name, you are showing value for them as another person, as well as addressing a negative situation respectfully. Always use a student’s name in a polite and calm manner, ensuring correct pronunciation.

Name Drop

If you are speaking in front of the class, slip the student’s name into your sentence without skipping a beat. For example, “Alright class, let’s move on to problem number 5, Derrick, and see if we can figure out the answer together.” If you have built a relationship with your students, a bit of humor can work well here also, such as making an exaggerated expression at the student while saying his name and continuing on. It is important the foundation of a relationship is present however, otherwise a student might feel picked on.

No to “Don’t Know”

Let students know from day one that there are three words (other than “Shut Up”) that can’t be uttered in your classroom: “I don’t know.” Offer alternatives to students that they can use instead, such as: “I’m not sure of the answer. Could I get some help figuring it out?” or “Could you come back to me in a minute after I’ve thought about that?” Simple language training such as this let’s student know up front that they won’t be able to be passed over – rather, they are going to be held to high expectations. This can create a more productive classroom environment and cut down on a teacher’s frustration.

Pause

Calmly stop what you are doing or saying, look at the student or group who are inattentive, and wait for them to refocus. Continue on as if nothing happened. This works particularly well if students are talking while you are talking; the sudden absence of your voice will often let them know you are on to them.

Positioning

If someone is off task or causing a disturbance (whispering, tapping a pencil, etc.) continue what you are doing while repositioning yourself so that you are standing near the student. The purpose is not to loom over the student, but to simply have a closer proximity.

Positive Directions

Address the student with a statement of what you want rather than pointing out what you don't want. For example, if a student is talking, state: "Jeffrey, please read the chapter that was assigned." By not even addressing the negative behavior, the student's possible responses (i.e. "But I wasn't talking!") are diffused.

Recharge Yourself

Teaching can be intellectually, emotionally, physically, and mentally taxing. While it is admirable to be invested in the welfare of your students, it is equally important to take private time each day to recharge yourself. Whether a quick walk around the track, a daily "silence and snack time" for yourself, or a moment to read, it is important to take at least a few moments for yourself during the school day. Likewise, give yourself plenty of time after school to unwind. This is a necessary part of preparing yourself for the next day. The happier you are and the less stressed you feel, the better you will be at dealing with your students.

Revisit and Reflect

One of the most important ways to proactively ensure behavior doesn't become an issue in the classroom is to continuously revisit the class rules and expectations discussed and set at the beginning of the year. If the class begins to struggle in a particular area, focus on the class expectations that address the negative behavior and discuss the situation honestly with students. Talk about why the expectations in this area were set and why they agreed to them. Discuss the negative effects that can result if the problem continues. It is also important to allow students to reflect upon their own behavior. For example, after a group activity, the teacher might have students respond in discussion or in writing to: What did we do well with? Are there any improvements we can make the next time we work in groups?

Student Action Plan

Create a worksheet for students to complete when they are having difficulty or exhibiting a behavior that needs corrected. The form should be simple. For example, create a handout with three simple questions: 1. What's the problem? 2. What's causing the problem? 3. How can you solve the problem? This approach puts students in the position to take responsibility for rectifying the issue, whether with or without teacher assistance. It also serves as a written documentation for a student having difficulty, which may be important in the future.

Write it Out

If a student is having a conflict, have all involved parties write out their side of what the problem is and how it is affecting them (making them feel). Explain to the student that you care very much about helping them resolve their issue and that the best way for you to do that is to understand the situation as best you can by reading what they write down. Often times, this process automatically diffuses students – it lets them think about and get out what they want to say and consider how they are feeling, while providing time to calm down as they write.

***Additional Discipline Help**

Before you can begin trying to change a child's behavior, it is important to properly identify that behavior and gain an understanding of why the student may be acting or reacting in such a way. "You Can Handle Them All" is a website that assists teachers in identifying over 100 common misbehaviors. The site also offers strategies for addressing each of those behaviors: www.disciplinehelp.com.