

Classroom Management: The Intervention Two-Step

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All of us have had major classroom disruptions that try our patience and push our limits. These incidents can threaten our sense of control and generate fear of looking weak to other students. We fear that other students might do the same thing if we don't take a strong stance. Couple these feelings with the possibility of taking the disruption personally, and we have a recipe for disaster. It's important that we divide our response into two parts:

1. Immediate stabilization
2. Intervention to resolve these issues

Crisis Management

If you go to the emergency room, the goal is not to make you better (unless the required treatment is minor). They simply want you to stop getting worse. They do not cure -- they stabilize. Once stable, you are directed to outpatient care or regular hospitalization. The same is true for firefighters, police, soldiers and all first responders. Before taking an affirmative intervening action, they stabilize the situation, environment, perimeter or people in need. The principle of all emergency situations is stop things from getting worse before trying to make them better.

The same is true in the classroom. Often teachers try to solve an unstable situation, only to escalate to the point where any intervention might not work. To be stable, both the teacher and student need to be relatively anger free, calm and willing to listen to the other's point of view.

Calming down requires time for both the student and teacher to depersonalize the incident. Often, students will

rethink what they did when given time to reflect. For example, many of us write e-mails and later, upon reflection, wish we'd never hit the send button. Having a waiting period can save us a lot of pain. Thus, this two-step process might sound time consuming. In reality, time is not a major factor. When we think about how much time it takes over the course of the year as situations worsen, we save a great deal of time with the two-step, which gives us far better results than quick, unstable interventions.

Common wisdom tells us to intervene as fast as possible, that waiting is a bad thing. I agree that waiting is not usually a good idea, but I disagree that an immediate intervention always works best. Most students and some teachers make things worse when the temperature is hot and emotions are high. It is far better to stabilize things before jumping immediately into an intervention. Lower the temperature first.

Do's, Don'ts and 5 Examples

As I have said, minor inappropriate behavior does not require the two-step, but when it is required, let's see how to do it:

- Understand that stabilizing is not excusing, letting the student get away with anything or ignoring. It is deferring the actual intervention to a more favorable time.
- Show the student that you're willing to hear his or her side of the story.
- Guess the motive for the misbehavior, and acknowledge it without agreeing to the student's choice of a solution.
- Deflect attempts to argue.
- Use humor.

Things to avoid:

- Criticizing, lecturing, scolding and blaming
- Arguing
- Saying or implying "no excuses"
- Taking immediate action
- Embarrassing or attacking the student's dignity
- Demanding, "What did you say?" in an accusatory manner

Here are some of my favorite examples of stabilization. If these stabilization techniques are not followed by an intervention strategy, they will not solve the problem. Try imagining what intervention you would use when things calm down.

1. Student (in front of the whole class): "This class sucks!"
Teacher: "I'm sure you have reasons for thinking that, but this is not the time to talk about it. I promise to listen to you after class."
2. A student calls another student a name, and that student hits him.
Teacher (to the hitter): "You have every right to defend yourself from insults, but hitting isn't an acceptable method. We need to have a conversation about better ways to solve this problem."
3. Student (out loud): "I hate this class!"
Teacher: "And yet you still come. That takes a lot of courage. Let's find a way to make this class better for you. I hope you have some worthwhile suggestions."
4. Young student: "I'm not going to, and you can't make me. You're not the boss of me!!!"

Teacher: "That is a great refusal. If anyone ever offers you drugs, that is exactly what I want you to say. Can you practice one more time?"

5. Student tells teacher to **** off.

Teacher: "You must be incredibly angry to use that kind of language with me. We need to find a way that is more acceptable to display your anger, but right now, I'm too angry with you to discuss this situation calmly. We must talk later when we are both ready."

These are just examples. Each one of us has to find our own comfortable voice to be able to mean what we say. Insincerity never works because children can read it much more often than we realize.

If these expressions don't work for you, you can always use the old standby: count to ten and take a deep breath. And if you have other effective intervention strategies, please share them in the comments section below.

Classroom Management

What can we do to create a positive dynamic in the classroom?

