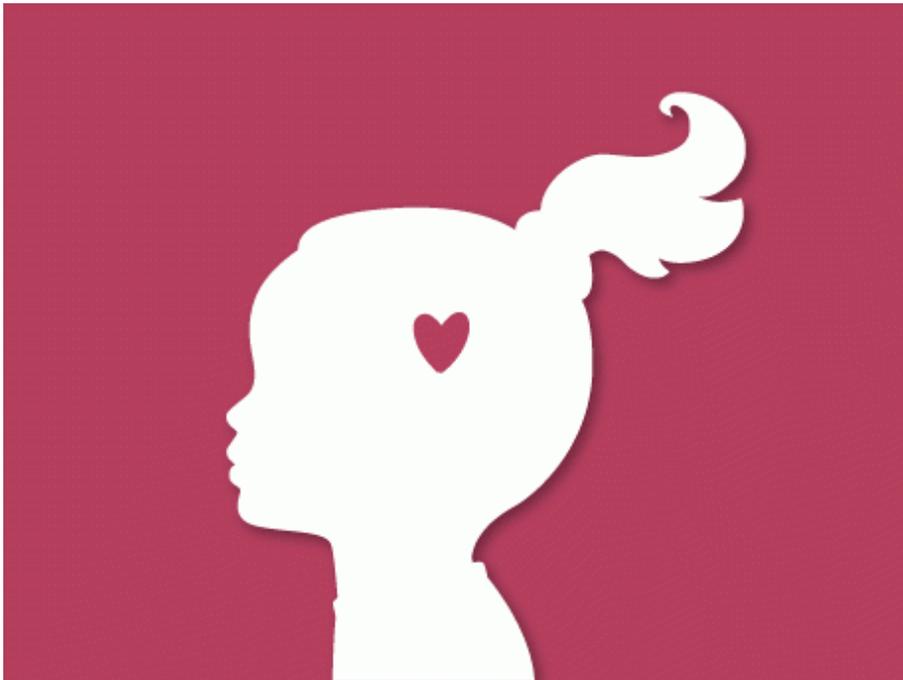


# Fresh Starts for Hard-to-Like Students

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Even though your toughest students are just kids at the mercy of emotions they don't understand or can't control, it can be hard for a teacher to stay calm and not take these ongoing behavioral problems personally. My advice: it's time to hit the reset button!

Tough kids are usually covering a ton of hurt. They defend against feeling pain by erecting walls of protection through rejection. Efforts to penetrate those walls by caring adults are generally met with stronger resistance expressed through emotional withdrawal and/or offensive language, gestures, and actions. Like a crying baby unable to articulate the source of its discomfort, these kids desperately need patient, determined, and affectionate adults with thick skin who refuse to take offensive behavior personally. Here are some ways to connect or reconnect with students who make themselves hard to like.

## 1. Express gratitude to your difficult students.

At a seminar that I gave at a school in Houston, one of the teachers talked about the turn-around in a boy from her class the year before who had been driving her crazy. She was determined to "love him even more" as her primary intervention. She initiated an "I need a hug" ritual by telling him that since she had no son at home to hug, she needed a "little boy hug" every day to get her day started in a happy way. She asked him to take the job, and every day, "little boy hugger" performed his function. Although challenges remained, mostly due to this child's very unpredictable home situation, his classroom behavior showed substantial improvement.

Since hugging isn't always appropriate, consider this strategy. For two weeks, try expressing something positive every day to each of your difficult students. Hard as it might be, make your first interaction each day something welcoming. For example, when a chronically late and uninterested student arrives, fight the temptation to ignore, tersely request a viable excuse, or hand out a late slip. Instead, make your first comment an expression of appreciation for coming. For example:

| Carson, I was hoping you'd show up -- and you did. Welcome! By the way, we're on page 62.

Wait until there is no audience around before you express concern and/or give a consequence for the student's behavior:

| Carson, I am concerned that you continue to fall behind because you're often missing part or all of class. Here's your late slip, but much more important to me is knowing how I might help you get here on time. What's going on?'

## 2. Use encouraging statements every day.

Words of encouragement get and keep students connected and motivated. Below are a dozen examples. Find an excuse to share at least a few of these every day.

- You really hung in there by \_\_\_\_\_.
- That was really cool.
- Wow, you pushed yourself today, and it really worked out.
- I was so impressed today when you \_\_\_\_\_.
- It was awesome to see you \_\_\_\_\_.
- That took some special effort.
- I hope you feel proud about \_\_\_\_\_, because you should.
- Thanks for putting a smile on my face when you \_\_\_\_\_.
- It's not easy to \_\_\_\_\_, but you are making it happen.
- Your cooperation is really appreciated. Thanks.
- That was flat-out good!
- Congratulations! (And then be specific about what you are congratulating.)

## 3. Act toward your worst student the way you act toward your best student.

Who is your best-behaved or most motivated student? When you think about that student, what adjectives come to mind? When you interact, what comments come naturally? When the student makes a mistake, how do you usually react? For one week, try acting toward your worst-behaved or least-motivated student in the same way, and see what happens.

A teacher at an elementary school that I recently visited told me about Ken, a fifth grade student who had developed a bad reputation but was making an effort to turn things around. Transitions were especially difficult. Knowing there was going to be a substitute teacher the next day, Ms. Silver told Ken, "Tomorrow a sub is going to be here. I expect responsible behavior, and there'll be consequences if I hear otherwise." The sub reported that Ken was awful. When Ms. Silver returned, she told him that she was stuck between a rock and a hard place because, although she was proud of his overall progress, she was very disappointed with his recent behavior. When she asked him what he thought would be a fair consequence he said, "If I was a good kid in this school, what would you do?" She said that she would probably ask the student to explain what happened, why it happened, and what he thought a good consequence would be. Ken looked her straight in the eye and said, "Well, then that is what you should do to me."

#### **4. Send the parents a "positive postcard."**

Prepare an email or note home that briefly describes positive behavior or an achievement that you've recently observed. Show it to the student before sending it. If you haven't seen positive behavior that you can genuinely acknowledge, write a positive note or email as if a behavior you are seeking has already happened. Show it to the student. Ask him or her to tell you when it would be a good time to send it.

How do you hit the reset button or make a fresh start with hard-to-like students? As always, your comments and suggestions are welcome and appreciated.