

# 13

## BREAKING THE CYCLE OF STUDENT MISBEHAVIOR

*“When the going gets tough,  
the tough get supportive.”*



**F**OR PARTICULARLY TOUGH KIDS and situations, employing all the approaches outlined in previous chapters doesn't do the trick. Even with the use of heavy-duty consequences, some kids continue to break the rules. What then? How do we help our students make permanent positive changes? While there are no guaranteed solutions, the most effective approaches arise out of our tried-and-true combination of assuming the best and breaking things into parts, as shown in all the strategies described below.

## Assumptions that Make a Difference

### Addressing the causes

To get to the root of student misbehaviors, we may need to address the reasons behind them. This doesn't always seem practical, given the limited time we have. But it can make all the difference.



## Why students act out

- ▲ When they don't understand the lesson, they may choose to push away feeling inadequate. They'd much rather see themselves as behavior problems than slow learners.
- ▲ They feel frustrated because they don't get it, and rather than treat frustration as a doorway into learning, they push it away, and end up acting out.
- ▲ It's possible that the lesson is inappropriate for them, and they act out as a communication to the teacher to change the lesson or the approach.
- ▲ It's possible that the behavior the teacher expects is unrealistic.
- ▲ The teacher has been reacting at them rather than responding with them.
- ▲ They are having problems at home.
- ▲ They are using drugs. Although drug use is often viewed as a symptom of underlying problems, once done with regularity, drugs can become the problem.
- ▲ They are having trouble with medication — not taking it, taking it too much, or not taking it regularly.
- ▲ They have emotional tension with peers.
- ▲ They are being bullied and/or intimidated by classmates.
- ▲ They are struggling in other classes.
- ▲ A myriad of other reasons, both in and out of the classroom.

Students don't act out because they are bad people. They are simply looking for ways to establish and maintain a sense of self while navigating through the sometimes extreme experiences they have. When a student acts out, it is often a call for help. By addressing these calls directly and honing in on solutions, we provide students with a chance to make real and lasting changes. If in our investigation

we discover reasons beyond our control, we can at least gain compassion for our students and ourselves, knowing what can and can't be changed.

## Helpful approaches

### Positive connections

Talking with Mark about his life requires that the teacher establish strong positive connections with him. Many strategies for this are outlined in Chapter 7, "Positive Connections." The essence of all the strategies is simply to talk with him — not about his poor behavior, but about anything he's interested in. Give him a chance to have personal time with us when we are not playing the role of authoritarian. Make this an ongoing commitment. It won't be easy, especially at first. He'll likely be wary of our sudden interest in his life. But if we stick with it, casually and consistently over the course of days — not as a one-time frontal assault — we'll notice that gradually Mark becomes more forthcoming, more involved, and more committed to succeeding in the class.



#### *A Closer Look*

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### "I-Statements" and active listening

Students like Mark want to feel respected and heard. One way is for the teacher to make an effort to listen closely and fully to what he has to say. It helps to repeat back to him what we hear, to make sure the communication is clear. For example, "I hear you saying that you think it's unfair that I singled you out when others were talking as well."

It also helps to make statements about ourselves, using the word "I." An example would be, "I feel concerned when I give the class a direction and you come up right afterwards to ask me what it was." I-statements help disarm situations. Because we are not directly making claims about Mark, he won't be as inclined to want to defend himself.



#### *Mrs. Allgood says*

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Listening is powerful. It's often enough to help the student turn around. If not, it can help us figure out the cause of the problem, giving us a chance to find simple solutions.

## If students are hungry, sometimes the best thing we can do is to feed them

If students keep calling out for attention, let's find ways to give it to them that assist the class, rather than disrupt it. We can give classroom jobs to our students; they can be in charge of supplies, pets and plants, collecting and/or passing out papers, designing bulletin boards, taking messages to other teachers, record keeping, welcoming new students, orientating other students to the computer. We can involve them in teaching their peers or teaching younger students from other classes.



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If students are fidgety and feel the need to move, let's provide them with the opportunity. Consultant Alan Mendler suggests that teachers use bungee cords or surgical elastic for ADHD kids. Tie lengths around the four legs of the students' chair, so that they can push against them with their legs. Above the chair, the teacher will see model students, still and focused on the lesson. Below the chair will be student legs moving at a hundred miles an hour. We can build movement into our lessons, by periodically providing students with squeeze-toys or art supplies, or sending them on errands. As we assume that students want to learn, let's also assume that sometimes they just need to move.

## Five Keys for Permanent Change

Sometimes knowing why doesn't help. Other times we can't figure out why. What then? Permanently changing behavior is not easy, for kids or adults — just think of all the time, money, and energy adults spend on losing weight and quitting smoking. Nonetheless, in the classroom there are some approaches that do

seem to make a difference in student behavior. All permanent change involves one or more of the five keys described below (the first three echo consultant Rick Curwin). Students have to:

1. **Want** to change
2. Know **how** to change
3. Have opportunities to **practice** changing
4. Be **conscious** of their choices as they are choosing them
5. Receive ongoing **support** from the teacher



#### *A Closer Look*

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These keys arise when we assume the best about our students — that they want to behave appropriately, but are stuck on the details. Below are three examples that help illustrate how these keys can be used to help our students.

## Example 1. Elementary school

Mrs. Allgood teaches a second grade class and her student Johnny has a terrible time with transitions. During the long-term art project, he is always the last one to put his materials away and return his chair to where it belongs. She's tried everything to get him to succeed. She's even tried a group reward if the whole class cleaned up in a given time. But Johnny still didn't do it fast enough, and the whole class suffered. What can she do? She assumes the best about Johnny — that he does want to learn this behavior. She assumes that for whatever reason, it's too complex for him. All her pep talks work for too short a time. He gets distracted and loses momentum.

Her solution is to break up his required task into smaller pieces. She talks to Johnny after school about what her expectations are. She gets him to buy-in that **he wants to make a change**. She then clarifies how he can succeed. When no one else is in the room, she puts the art supplies on his desk and sits him down. She asks him where the supplies need to go when it's time to clean up (**how**). She then has him **practice** putting the supplies away. She asks him to talk about the dis-



*A Closer Look*

She gives Johnny the *minimum amount of support* he needs to ensure that he succeeds completely.

tractions that occur during class, and what he can do to counter them (conscious of his choices). She supports him by encouraging him to succeed the next day during class.

The next day, just before the students begin to put their art supplies away, Mrs. Allgood has a brief, private conversation with Johnny, reminding him of what they did after school the day before. “Johnny, remember our talk about cleaning up the art materials? What are you going to do with the scissors? Where does this paper go? How about the markers? Do you think you can do this?

You know what, I know you can. I’m going to stand right next to you when the class starts cleaning up, so you can show me how well you can do it. I’m about to ask the class to clean up. Are you ready?” Then she announces to the class that it’s time to put the supplies away. Then she gives Johnny the *minimum amount of support* he needs to ensure that he succeeds completely. In Johnny’s case, it might initially mean that Mrs. Allgood walks him from station to station, handing him the supplies one at a time, and encouraging him as he goes. In content teaching, this is called “guided practice.” It’s the same in teaching procedures or behavior. When he’s completed the task, she lets him know how well he did.

The following day, she does the same thing. On the third day, she pulls back a bit. She tells Johnny, “You’ve done so well the last two days putting your art supplies away, this time when I ask the class to clean up, I’m going to stand in the back of the room and watch how well you do.” If this is too big a step for Johnny to succeed, she comes up with an intermediary step: “Johnny, this time



*A Closer Look*

Mrs. Allgood is therefore not only Johnny’s “impartor of content,” she is also his coach and cheerleader.

I’m going to stand in the back and watch how well you can put things away. Each time you put an item away, please stop and look at me, and give me a thumbs up. I’ll give you a thumbs up, and then you can go on to the next station.” Over time, Mrs. Allgood pulls back more and more. At some point Johnny will have internalized the appropriate behavior, and will be able to put his supplies away without needing her extra guidance.

The support Mrs. Allgood provides makes a big difference. Her actively assuming the best about him is contagious; he starts to assume the best about himself. He starts wanting to change and is more willing to try. Mrs. Allgood is therefore not only Johnny's "impartor of content," she is also his coach and cheerleader.

## Example 2. Middle school

Josh is a sixth-grade student who constantly disrupts class by calling out of turn. Consequences haven't made a difference, because he's essentially unaware that he's doing it. Before consequences have any power, he needs to slow down internally to the point where he is aware of his choice to call out as he's making it.

His teacher, Mrs. Allgood, has a conversation with Josh after school. First, she gets him to agree that it's in his best interest to change his behavior. The conversation continues:

- Mrs. Allgood:** Josh, if you tried really hard not to call out in class tomorrow, how many times would you call out?
- Josh:** None! I promise I'll never do it again!
- Mrs. Allgood:** I appreciate your desire, Josh, but calling out can be a hard habit to break, even if you try really hard. Today in class you probably called out ten or more times. What do you think would be a more realistic number, if you tried really hard?
- Josh:** Hmm. Maybe... three times?
- Mrs. Allgood:** That seems like a more realistic goal. I'll tell you what. Tomorrow when class starts, I'll put four yellow post-it notes on your desk. Each time you call out, I'll give you a private hand signal, by touching my ear like this. Your job when you call out is to remove one note, crumple it up, and put it in your pocket. Let's see if you can have at least one note remaining by the time class ends.



#### A Closer Look

He is practicing, and his “mess-ups” are part of the learning process. The more practice he gets in a safe environment, the more likely he is to succeed.

The next day, Josh does his best to abide by the new policy. He is now kinesthetically monitoring his own progress, slowing down internally, and increasing his awareness of his choice to call out. What happens if he uses up all four post-it notes with twenty minutes to go in class? Should Mrs. Allgood give him a consequence? Not initially. It would help him more if she simply gave him more notes, and encouraged him to do better the next time (Kindergarten kids who sit on the floor can put bracelets around their wrists instead of post-it notes on their desks). He is practicing, and his “mess-ups” are part of the learning process. The more practice he gets in a safe environment, the more likely he is to succeed.

In this example, Josh agrees that he wants to make a change. Mrs. Allgood shows him how to do it, and he gets a chance to practice during class. His awareness increases, and he receives ongoing support from Mrs. Allgood.

The post-it note strategy means that Josh is removing a negative. An alternative can be to add a positive. Mrs. Allgood gives him a pie chart, with eight slices. Each slice represents six minutes. Josh is told that every time six minutes goes by and he doesn’t call out, he can shade in one of the slices. His goal is to have as many shaded slices as he can by the time the forty-eight minute class is over. He can use his watch or the wall clock. Younger kids can use a visual timer, where the red section grows smaller as the time counts down.



#### A Closer Look

Many teachers reason that the students say they want to change, and the proof will be in the pudding. But Mrs. Allgood knows not to stop there.

These strategies work best if Mrs. Allgood encourages Josh and speaks to him about what happens to him when he calls out. She can work with him one-on-one, modeling the things in class that distract him — which can be a lot of fun. Any way that she can get him to be aware of what he’s choosing will help him speed up the desired changes.

### Example 3. High school

Johnny has grown up. His name is now John. He is chronically late to his first period class. His tardies have

piled up, his grade is slipping, but he still comes in late. Mrs. Allgood has a meeting with John to discuss his tardies. She asks, “Do you want your grade to keep going down?” As soon as he says, “No,” she’s accomplished number one — getting him to want to change.

This is the point where many teachers stop. They reason that the student wants to change, and the proof will be in the pudding. But Mrs. Allgood goes further. She talks with John about his pattern in the morning. He tells her that his alarm clock goes off on time, but he keeps hitting the snooze button. She suggests that he put the alarm clock on the other side of the room. She also suggests that John’s classmate Susie call him in the morning to make sure he’s up. John agrees to try. But Mrs. Allgood doesn’t stop there. She knows that John is embarrassed about asking Susie, and may not actually do it. So she asks him when he will talk to her, and what he’s going to say to get her to call him. She has John repeat the lines he needs to say. She then tells him that she’ll check with Susie the next day to see how the process went. Only then does she end the conversation by encouraging him to succeed the next day.

Does John show up on time the next day? Maybe. He’s certainly more likely to show up, now that he has admitted that he **wants to change**, he’s looked at **how** to make that change, he’s **practiced** what he needs to say, he’s **aware** of his resistance and is willing to make the effort anyway, and he has **support** both from Mrs. Allgood and his friend Susie.

All teachers address one or more of these five steps with their students all the time. Putting them together into a more formal plan helps streamline the process, and helps fill in the gaps when students are still not changing their behavior.

## How do I use these strategies with the limited time I have?

This process is labor intensive, and takes a lot of time and energy from the teacher. But it’s worth it if we can help kids turn their behaviors around. One strategy is to start with the one stu-



*Mrs. Allgood says*

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dent who adversely affects the rest of the class the most — usually it's the student whose absence gives us the biggest sigh of relief. Often if one or two key students stop misbehaving, the whole feeling in the class changes for the better.

## What if my student doesn't want to change?

Most students will admit they want to change if we assume the best about them as we speak to them. We may have to wade through the noise in their heads (“I want ice cream and cake for dinner”) to find what their gut is saying (“I need to eat vegetables”).

We can frame the conversation in terms of power. Something students want is power and control in their lives. Calling out impulsively, for example, is a sign of a lack of power, a lack of self-control.

We can frame the conversation in terms of the practical: “Mark, do you really want to keep getting in trouble? I didn't think so...”

If a student still won't admit that he wants to change, we can assume it anyway: “Let's pretend for the time being that this does matter to you, and let's see what happens.” It can still work.



*A Closer Look*

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## Tips For Temporary Change

The above steps aren't always possible. Time is short, the student is reactive, and we are too focused elsewhere.

If this is the case, we can try other approaches described below. While they are not as thorough as those described above, they can help to lengthen the time between student misbehaviors.

## Strategies

### The conversation

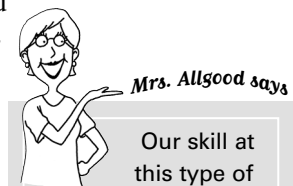
A private conversation with a student after he has fulfilled his consequence can be a critical element in improving behavior. This

should be done after the “dust has settled,” and he is receptive. We should address at least three things:

1. The student tells the teacher what his misbehavior was.
2. The student describes what appropriate behavior should look and sound like.
3. The teacher cleans the slate, creating or reestablishing a positive connection with the student, welcoming him back into the classroom community.

This follow-up conversation can be quick, and while not a guarantee that change will stick, it often can make a huge difference in disarming chronic student misbehavior. It helps the student look squarely at the choices he was making and can make in the future, and it helps him remember that the teacher is on his side. If time is too short for all three steps, the teacher can do the talking in steps one and two, telling the student what his behavior was and what it should be in the future. The most important of the three steps is number three. The positive connection between student and teacher is often what it takes to short-circuit chronic student misbehavior. A combination of firm (using consequences) and soft (nurturing a positive connection) is often enough to help kids turn their behavior around.

Our skill at this type of conversation will grow over time. Our interpersonal skills come sharply into focus, as we wend our way in to our students' hearts, skirting around and under their defenses, and reminding them that not only are they responsible, they are also respected and welcome.



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## Use writing

One option is to have students fill out a form when they are serving a time-out or a visit to the office. The form can ask them several key questions, such as:

- ▲ What happened?
- ▲ How did you feel?
- ▲ What did you do?
- ▲ What are you going to do next time?



#### *A Closer Look*

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Another writing option is a student-generated action plan for changing behavior. Questions can include:

- ▲ What do you need to change?
- ▲ What's the cause?
- ▲ What's your solution, and what are the steps involved?
- ▲ How will you practice those steps?
- ▲ What type of support do you need?
- ▲ How will you keep track of your own progress?
- ▲ How will you know when the problem has been solved?

These forms won't necessarily end conflict, but they will allow the student some reflection time where he can slow down and be more prepared to squarely and positively address his behavior.

## Behavior contracts

Teachers can create individual behavior contracts for students, focused on changing one student behavior at a time. The contracts should be signed by the student, his parents, and the teacher. They can be as behavioral and nit-picky as we want. The focus is to break appropriate behaviors into smaller, doable parts, and to monitor and build upon the successes he shows. Tying success on the contract to privileges at home works well. Tying it to school privileges is also effective. Behavior contracts are particularly successful if the students have a hand in designing them, and if they include a timeline and/or rubric for students to monitor their progress.



#### *A Closer Look*

Behavior contracts should ideally be focused on one behavior at a time.



*Wise Apple Advice*

## A last word on breaking the cycle

The common threads among all the approaches in this chapter are simple:

- ▲ Make positive connections with students
- ▲ Assume the best — the students want to make a change
- ▲ Break the change into simpler and simpler steps
- ▲ Give students a chance to reflect on their choices
- ▲ Provide students the chance to take responsibility for their choices
- ▲ Check progress as we go, and provide support along the way

Not coincidentally, these approaches are the same whether we are teaching content, procedures, or behavior. Once we internalize the pattern of these approaches, there is no limit to the creative solutions that we can discover in working with our students.