

# Recognizing and Staying out of Behavior Management Traps

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Teaching students with difficult to manage behavior is wrought with behavior management traps that are often deceptive and subtle in their occurrence. Whether we have taught for 1 year or 25 years these traps are easy to succumb to on a regular basis. So often, as a teacher or in other positions working with students with behavior problems, I have had good management interventions on hand, but these subtle traps caused my strategies to be ineffective. The following will be a description of 7 common traps that those working with students with behavior problems often get into and some suggestions for breaking out of each trap.

### 1. Passionate Discipline Trap

This trap is one of the most common and also one of the most difficult to break. Several years ago while observing a class of elementary self-contained students with EBD I saw a perfect example of this trap. Because I arrived at the class late in the day, I wasn't sure of what had happened, but I could tell with one look at the teacher that things were not going well. As I sat in the class, I realized that she was especially irritated with one 10-year-old boy. She walked stiffly over to the student and with strong emotion in her voice and face told the student all that he had not done and what he needed to do. After about a minute of this lecture she concluded by asking the student if he could "possibly do just one paper so that she would feel like he had been in school that day!" The student stared at her during the minute, and when she had finished, he said with a deadpan voice and face (in what I believe to be all sincerity), "Ms. Johnson, you know, you really need to get out a little more often!" The teacher was a little surprised, but turned and walked away without comment. I believe that this student's comment was quite revealing. He realized that all the emotion/passion in the world was really not going to change things and he seemed worried about Ms. Johnson's well-being.

This story demonstrates how we often get trapped into making our discipline full of emotion and passion. Some of us may do it in a very subtle way, while others are more demonstrative. Regardless, students usually prefer to see passion and it is often quite reinforcing to them. I sometimes see classrooms where little passion is shown when students are calm, but the instant that correction is needed, passion in the teacher is evident. When this occurs we are often teaching the student that they must act out to get a reaction.

The keys to getting out of this trap are as follows: (1) use dispassionate or matter-of-fact discipline in most cases. It is important that teachers are aware of how they respond during discipline moments. Video and audio taping (although very painful to watch) are very helpful in revealing ways in which our discipline may be more passionate than we realize. More specifically, it is important to be aware of facial expressions, voice tone, and use of body language as we interact with students in those difficult times. It is important to not unconsciously grimace or change your voice tone to a higher octave during corrections. Rhodes, Jenson, and Reavis (1993) describe the "precision request" in which teachers are to give reprimands in a simple three step process as follows: a) Please ....., if no compliance then b) I need you to ....., if not compliance then c) administer a mild negative consequence. This can be helpful in being more dispassionate,

especially when we tend to escalate our passion as we are required to repeat a reprimand or request a number of times. (2) Quote a classroom rule that has been broken. (3) Point to the classroom rule being violated. (4) Give messages that limit or correct behaviors on cards or Post-it notes. Sometimes the less we verbalize our discipline, the less emotional we will become.

## **2. Too General Trap**

I remember as a teacher telling a student that if he would “behave” during the remainder of the activity, then he would be able to go on to the next more fun activity. During the remaining 10 minutes of the activity he exhibited about 60% appropriate behaviors and 40% inappropriate behaviors. At the designated time I informed him that he would not be able to move to the next activity because of his inappropriate behaviors. He consequently became very upset and detailed for me all of the appropriate behaviors that he had exhibited and in his mind felt strongly that these behaviors constituted “behaving”. A power struggle ensued. Using terminology such as “be good,” “do what you are supposed to do,” “act appropriately,” “act responsible,” and/or “do your best” will often get us into trouble because these requests for the student with a behavior disorder are far too general. We know that students are experts at finding loopholes in what we say to them. Giving students broad or undefined requests or consequences often leads to an even greater discipline problem.

Suggestions for staying out of this trap include: (1) Be very specific in defining what you want and what will happen as a result. If you have a student who gets out of his or her seat, talks to others, and does not finish all of his or her work during a designated work time, it would be important to say, “If you stay in your seat for the next 15 minutes, do not talk to anyone around you, and complete all of your work, then you will be able to go to break with the rest of the class.” Then ask, “What are the three things you need to do?” A lack of time and too many things to do often hinder us from being this specific with students, but in the end we spend much less time when we are detailed. (2) Use self-monitoring techniques. Sprick, Sprick, and Garrison (1993) give excellent examples of ways to use this technique. Setting up a sheet or card with specific behaviors needed by the student and allowing them to mark them as they are accomplished allows the student to know exactly what your expectations are for their behavior. These self-monitoring sheets can be used for specific problem times and do not have to be used all day. (3) Designate by number the rule(s) to be followed during a specific activity in order to earn a privilege. I often find that teachers have a great set of rules posted in the room, but they rarely refer to them or use them in a concrete way.

## **3. Cure-All Trap**

Most of our students with behavioral disorders come to us with a multitude of problems. They usually don't have just one problem. Because we want students to “get better” quickly we sometimes get trapped into developing and using interventions that we hope will “cure” most or all of a student's problems. For example, if we have a student who is verbally abusive to others, has significant problems in reading, has poor concentration skills, and blurts out regularly in class, we may attempt to use a point system to resolve all of these issues. When the point system works for two of these behaviors but not the other two, then we often conclude that he is not responding to the point system and try another intervention. When that intervention does not fix all the behaviors then we try another and another. Again, because the demands of teaching are so varied and time consuming we hope that single

interventions will handle multiple problems. Unfortunately this may not be the case. As we constantly change our interventions, a student gets the sense of power that he or she can sabotage our attempts to make changes.

Instead of trying to fix everything, the following is suggested: (1) Pick the one or two most disruptive and disturbing behaviors of a student (the same principle would apply to multiple problems with a whole class) and concentrate on developing an intervention for this behavior(s) only. Sometimes other less severe behaviors can wait. This may sound a little scary at first, but in the end interventions will often generalize to the other nontarget behaviors. (2) An effective intervention that I have used with a number of students for both defining the one most severe behavior and working on increments of progress is something I call the Behavioral Continuum Form. Steps for using this form are as follows: first, discuss with the student the ultimate goal behavior that would need to be exhibited to earn the total of some preset reward. Second, very specifically define the one behavior that is presently getting the student into the most trouble (and subsequently keeping the student from getting reinforcement). And third, define with the student the two or several behaviors that, although not the ultimate goal behavior, will progress toward the final desired behavior. Then, set reinforcement for the behaviors that move toward the goal behavior. The following is an example of the Behavioral Continuum:

In this example, the numbers represent points that can be received for each behavior. The continuum can be expanded to more than two points so that there are a greater number of incremental steps toward the goal behavior.

#### **4. Preaching/Moralizing Trap**

I have sometimes had a tendency to turn discipline into a sermon. When a student has repeatedly failed to respond to an intervention or correction I have caught myself telling the student everything they have ever done, everything they are presently doing, and everything that will now happen to them in the future. This is the trap of using preaching and moralizing instead of effective discipline. A middle school teacher recently shared with me that she believed she was finally reaching a very difficult student by giving him one of her best “sermons.” After several minutes of preaching, she asked him if he understood what she was trying to say to him. He responded with “You sure do have big pores in your nose!” We often hear that kids listen to the first 20 seconds of the content of what we say and then they start looking at body language. After 20 seconds, we may begin to sound like the teacher in the Peanuts cartoon.

Staying out of this trap involves the following: (1) Practice verbally succinct discipline. The less we say, the more the student will probably hear. (2) Say less and the less emotional the discipline becomes. (3) Make verbalizations to students in those “negative” times as brief as possible and save the moral or practical lessons for times when the student is more receptive. It is probably true that many of our students with behavioral disorders have been preached to so often during discipline that they may be immune to the moral lessons they have so often heard as a part of discipline. (See Seeman, 1988 for suggestions on ways to prevent discipline problems through language and style).

## 5. Questioning Trap

“Did I tell you to sit over there?” “Is that what you are supposed to be doing?” “How many times have I told you not to say that?” “Could we please have it quiet in here?” Do any of these sound familiar? When I need to give a student a direct command, reprimand, or request, I often fall into the trap of repeatedly asking questions. I do not really want an answer and if I get one then I sometimes get more upset with the student. Using a question may indicate to the student that we are not firm about the request or it may indicate that we are being sarcastic. Questioning when we are really requesting, sometimes leads the student to think that it is okay to not respond to the questions for which we really do not want an answer. Another type of questioning trap occurs when we see a student engaged in a misbehavior, such as tripping another student, and we address the student by immediately asking them what they were just doing. As adults we should remember that from the student’s perspective they are probably thinking, “Well, if the teacher is asking me about the behavior then maybe they didn’t see it happen.” The student thinks he or she has a 50-50 chance and will say “I didn’t do anything.” The cycle worsens because now the issue is not only that the student has acted inappropriately, but he or she has also been dishonest about it.

This is one of the toughest and most subtle traps because asking questions becomes a habit. To stay out of the questioning try the following: (1) Practice making firm, direct requests in a matter-of-fact manner for student compliance. For example, be sure to say “You need to be in your seat,” rather than “Is that your seat?” (2) Ask appropriate questions in discipline situations. These are questions where you truly want an answer. For example, “Is what you are doing right now helping you to complete your work?” (see Glasser, 1965) or “Would you like to choose to stay in your seat or choose the other designated area in which to work?” (3) If students are observed committing an inappropriate behavior, rather than question them, simply state that you saw what happened and follow your normal consequences.

## 6. Negative Criticism Trap

One of the first things I do when going into a classroom to observe is to perform a negative to positive ratio of comments and interactions. Almost without fail, I find that classrooms with the least amount of disruption from the difficult student(s) have a higher rate of positive interactions than negative. Likewise, when a classroom is having serious discipline problems, I almost always see a high degree of negative interactions between the teacher and students. This trap occurs so easily because we are busy and need certain behaviors to stop immediately. We end up spending our day saying, “No,” “Stop it,” “Shhh...,” “Get to work,” and “Not in here you don’t.” Another reason this trap is so easy to fall into is because it often gives us some immediate reinforcement. When we say “Stop it,” the student will temporarily stop what he or she is doing. The cessation of the behavior reinforces our saying “Stop it” and we continue to make negative remarks. Unfortunately, the behavior does not stop in the long run and often escalates as time goes on. Whatever gets the attention will usually increase in frequency and duration!

To stay out of this trap follow these suggestions: (1) Make sure that your positive comments and interactions with students are higher than your negative ones. This does not mean that you should walk around the classroom praising students for everything they do. Students will

eventually see you as insincere. The point is to give attention in a way that is natural and comfortable to you as well as age appropriate for the student. (2) When you do correct or reprimand, be sure that these negative interactions do not outnumber your positive interactions. Some teachers have audio taped their class or kept a written record to determine their positive to negative ratio. Another suggestion for assessing your positive to negative ratio is the “bean” method. At the start of the day put a handful of dried beans in your left pocket. Each time you have a positive interaction with a student transfer a bean to your right pocket. Assess your progress and try to increase the number of beans you have in your right pocket at the end of the day.

## **7. “I Must Win Them Over” Trap**

Because I care, I think I must see the student change or see the student show positive emotions before my eyes. I recently had an experience where a student, with whom I had worked years ago, sent a letter to tell me how well he was doing in school and to thank me for how much I helped him. I was shocked! During the time that I worked with this student, I visibly saw no changes. In fact, he seemed to get worse during the school year. Many difficult-to-manage students will never show us that they are “better” or acknowledge that we have helped them. When we feel we must see immediate results to feel successful, then we may demand or force change and end up in a power struggle with the student.

Instead, to avoid this trap try the following: (1) Do not always look for the student’s attitude to change. Sometimes the behavior gets better but the attitude stays the same. (2) Be sure you support the student with any positive changes made, even though they may seem quite small. We usually have our students for a year at a time. We can only hope to make some changes in them; we don’t have to cure them of all of their ills.

In addition to the above traps, I am sure each person can think of some traps of their own they fall into when working with difficult students. If you find yourself relating to many of these aforementioned traps, be careful not to be discouraged, you are in good company. All of us know what it feels like to be “trapped” and to even see it coming, but still step directly into the trap. Hopefully, by being more aware of these and/or other known traps we will get better at recognizing them and therefore be able to better assist students in managing their behavior.