



5 Strategies To Avoid With Difficult Students; Plus One Radio Interview

Five of the most frequently recommended strategies for dealing with difficult students can actually cause an increase or a worsening of misbehavior.

Which begs the question: If they cause behavior to get worse, then why are they recommended?

Well, for a few reasons.

- They're easy to explain.
- They've been around so long people assume they work.
- They make sense. In other words, they seem like they should work.
- They offer tantalizing hope for teachers at the end of their rope.

And the frustrating, almost cruel, thing is, even with the most challenging students, a few of the five strategies do result in almost instantaneous improvement. *Yes, I think this is going to work! I think I found the answer!*

But alas, the improvement disappears nearly as soon as it arrives – lasting for a day or two, perhaps a week.

And after that, all bets are off – which is why the familiar strategies listed below are cycled over and over again with the same students, year after tired year.

So let's set the record straight. Let's ruffle some feathers. Let's throw these ineffective, pull-the-rug-out-from-under-you ways of dealing with difficult students on the scrap heap.

But be forewarned.

They are among the first strategies many of your colleagues will enthusiastically recommend to you, rolling off their tongue like they've recommended them a thousand times before.

1. Behavior Contracts

Behavior contracts are perhaps the most favored strategies for dealing with difficult students because you're guaranteed to see immediate and often stunning improvement – which can feel great, exciting, the answer to your prayers.

However, that improvement will be short-lived. Any strategy that involves a “do this and get that” scenario weakens over time and does nothing to spark intrinsic motivation – which is the one ingredient necessary for real, lasting improvement.

Behavior contracts also label students, providing a daily reminder that their teacher doesn't believe they're capable of controlling themselves like a regular member of the class.

2. Ignoring

Anyone who has ever tried this one knows it doesn't work with difficult students. It might sound good in theory, and you'll find no shortage of people lining up to recommend it to you, but in a working classroom ignoring difficult students usually ends in disaster.

Most of the time the student being ignored will respond by ratcheting up his or her attention-getting behavior, at times going so far as to sing, yell, or even laugh while you're trying to teach.

When a student misbehaves, no matter who it is, you have an obligation to address it as soon as you're able using your previously agreed-upon [classroom management plan](#) – the same one used for every student in your class.

3. Recess Time-Out

If your school has a recess time-out or detention area, then chances are it's poorly supervised by someone other than the teacher of those particular students. And therein lies the problem.

[Recess time-out](#) only works if you, as the classroom teacher, are the one doing the supervising. Otherwise, it's a weak consequence, sitting there with a whole band of troublemakers from all over the school. For most students, it's little more than a nuisance.

If you don't show your students, prove to your students, that you care enough to supervise them during recess time-out – preferably in your own classroom – then the consequence won't have any meaning to the student.

4. Permanent Time-Out

It's not uncommon to see difficult students seated in peculiar areas of the classroom – in the corner, up against the front wall, pushed against the teacher's desk.

I call this permanent time-out, and it's another form of labeling. It communicates to difficult students that the teacher has given up on them. It says, in effect, *"I don't believe in you or your capacity to change, so we're going to keep you forever separated, regardless of how you behave."*

Permanent time-out merely reinforces in the student's mind that he or she is a behavior problem. It becomes part of who they are, like their eye color or where they were born.

5. Special Rewards And Praise

This strategy is typically used in conjunction with ignoring. In an effort to build self-esteem, difficult students are showered with rewards and praise whenever they behave in a way that is a common classroom expectation.

The idea is that if you "catch them doing something good" or doing what they're supposed to, and praise them heartily for it, then they'll feel good about themselves and their behavior will improve.

And yes, there can be immediate, on-the-spot improvement. But over the long haul what it does is tell difficult students that they're not good enough to be treated like everybody else. Furthermore, excessive awards and praise carry with them a whiff of condescension. You can almost see the embarrassment in students' eyes when they know, deep down, it's not real.

Note: This is true for difficult students in regular education classrooms. For more info on this topic, see the article, [Why You Shouldn't Reward Students For Good Behavior](#).

The Same Plan For Every Student

Most difficult students are able to make lasting changes in behavior when they're subject to [the same solid classroom management plan as everybody else](#).

They've been made to feel somehow different for so many of their school years that when they meet a teacher who really believes in them, who places them on equal footing with everybody else, they blossom.

A Radio Interview With Smart Classroom Management

I was interviewed yesterday by Nicole Eredics and Terri Mauro of *Special Needs Talk Radio*. It's available as a free download at iTunes. Just [click here](#) and then scroll to *The Inclusive Classroom* 1/6/12.

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