



How To: Identify the Big Ideas To Guide Behavior Management

Teachers skilled in classroom management are able to respond appropriately to just about any behavior that a student brings through the classroom door. While having a toolkit of specific behavioral strategies is important, the real secret of educators who maintain smoothly running classrooms with minimal behavioral disruptions is that they are able to view problem student behaviors through the lens of these seven 'big ideas' in behavior management:

1. *Check for academic problems.* The correlation between classroom misbehavior and deficient academic skills is high (Witt, Daly, & Noell, 2000). Teachers should, therefore, routinely assess a student's academic skills as a first step when attempting to explain why a particular behavior is occurring. And it logically follows that, when poor academics appear to drive problem behaviors, the intervention that the teacher selects should address the student's academic deficit.
2. *Identify the underlying function of the behavior.* Problem behaviors occur for a reason. Such behaviors serve a *function* for the student (Witt, Daly, & Noell, 2000). The most commonly observed behavioral functions in classrooms are escape/avoidance and peer or adult attention (Packenham, Shute, & Reid, 2004). When an educator can identify the probable function sustaining a particular set of behaviors, the teacher has confidence that interventions selected to match the function will be correctly targeted and therefore likely to be effective. For example, if a teacher decides that a student's call-outs in class are sustained by the function of adult attention, that instructor may respond by shifting the flow of that attention-e.g., interacting minimally with the student during call-outs but boosting adult attention during times when the student shows appropriate behavior.
3. *Eliminate behavioral triggers.* Problem behaviors are often set off by events or conditions within the instructional setting (Kern, Choutka, & Sokol, 2002). Sitting next to a distracting classmate or being handed an academic task that is too difficult to complete are two examples of events that might trigger student misbehavior. When the instructor is able to identify and eliminate triggers of negative conduct, such actions tend to work quickly and--by preventing class disruptions--result in more time available for instruction (Kern & Clemens, 2007).
4. *Redefine the behavioral goal as a replacement behavior.* When a student displays challenging behaviors, it can be easy to fall into the trap of simply wishing that those misbehaviors would go away. The point of a behavioral intervention, however, should be to expand the student's repertoire of pro-social, pro-academic behaviors--rather than just extinguishing aberrant behaviors. By selecting a positive behavioral goal that is an appropriate replacement for the student's original problem behavior, the teacher reframes the student concern in a manner that allows for more effective intervention planning (Batsche, Castillo, Dixon, & Forde, 2008). For example, an instructor who is concerned that a student is talking with peers about non-instructional topics during independent seatwork might select as a replacement behavior that the student will engage in "active, accurate academic responding".
5. *Rule out the most likely causes for misbehavior first.* Teachers can access a wealth of information sources when attempting to identify the cause of misbehavior: e.g., student work products, direct observation; interviews (with the student, other teachers, parents), etc. However, when trying to understand misbehavior, educators may be too quick to choose global explanations that fit preconceptions of the student--but are not supported by the data. For example, a teacher may describe a student who is non-compliant and fails to complete classwork as 'apathetic', 'unmotivated', or 'lazy'. However, students are rarely so sealed off from the world that their behavioral problems are determined solely by their own attitudes or work ethic. It is far more likely that a student displays challenging behavior because of significant interactions with elements of his or her environment (e.g., attempting to escape work that is too difficult; seeking the attention of peers in the classroom). Instructors should first collect and analyze information on the student from several sources and rule out the most common ('low-inference') explanations for misbehavior (Christ, 2008) before considering whether students' internal levels of motivation



could be the primary cause of the problem behavior.

6. *Be flexible in responding to misbehavior.* Teachers have greater success in managing the full spectrum of student misbehaviors when they respond flexibly--evaluating each individual case and applying strategies that logically address the likely cause(s) of that student's problem conduct (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). An instructor may choose to respond to a non-compliant student with a warning and additional disciplinary consequences, for example, if evidence suggests that the misbehavior stems from his seeking peer attention and approval. However, that same teacher may respond to non-compliance with a behavioral conference and use of defusing strategies if the misbehavior appears to have been triggered by a negative peer comment.
7. *Manage behaviors through strong instruction.* A powerful method to prevent misbehavior is to keep students actively engaged in academic responding (Lewis, Hudson, Richter, & Johnson, 2004). A teacher is most likely to 'capture' a student's behavior for academic purposes when the instructor ensures that the student has the necessary academic skills to do the assigned classwork, is given explicit instruction to master difficult material, and receives timely feedback about his or her academic performance (Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Boice, 2008).

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