

STRATEGY for dealing with OPPOSITIONAL BEHAVIOUR in the CLASSROOM & SCHOOL

The behaviour that is probably the most stressful for teachers to deal with is open defiance and absolute refusal to cooperate. Particularly as this usually occurs with an audience of other children (or worse other staff). The feelings of helplessness can quickly turn from frustration to extreme anger. It is the behaviour that even experienced teachers dread and new teachers can have nightmares about.

There is growing evidence that oppositional behaviour in children can be entirely related to diet, (especially insufficient essential fatty acids, magnesium and zinc). This is likely to be particularly relevant for children in the central desert of Australia. (Unfortunately, from what I have seen, even in schools with federally funded nutrition programs the diet provided is highly unlikely to be adequate in these nutrients). The traditional diet was extremely rich in all these nutrients.

In some children proteins in cows milk and wheat have been shown to cause neurotoxic effects. Inadequate sleep and erratic blood glucose levels can also contribute to very difficult behaviour and poor concentration.

However oppositional behaviour in individual children, or as a culture in the school, also occurs when children are highly stressed. This is often due to factors the school, the child and even the families have no control over. But making the school a place where children feel emotionally and physically safe can quickly change oppositional behaviour. The school can also teach and model constructive ways to cope with stress and problem solve.

Emotional safety is more than the absence of threat. Emotional safety includes creating an environment that is emotionally nurturing (providing respect, acceptance, recognition, positive attention, appropriate boundaries and limits, and realistic but stimulating expectations).

Physical safety is more than the infrastructure but includes not being bullied or WITNESSING abusive behaviour. This is not just what occurs between children but includes teacher/child, and teacher/teacher interactions. (Children can often evaluate the degree of positive regard or hostility between staff extremely well). Witnessing abusive behaviour leaves children wondering if they will be targeted next, increasing their level of stress and consequently compromising their ability to learn.

One of the difficulties in changing oppositional behaviour in students is that teachers are human. The last thing you may feel like doing to a child who has made you feel incompetent professionally or frustrated beyond endurance is to give them any kind of emotional nurturing. Instead you can live in hope they will move schools, or if that is not going to happen you avoid them, hoping not to trigger another episode of defiance. Unfortunately the teacher's survival strategy of avoidance inevitably makes things worse as the child starts to create situations to gain attention and conflict. The conflict can act as a momentary tension release for the child as they literally pass their distress over to you.

There are many strategies that schools use to deal with this behaviour once it has occurred ie schools and teachers tend to be reactive rather than proactive in creating environments that minimize the chances of oppositional behaviour occurring. Unfortunately while strategies involving negative logical consequences (viewed as humiliating punishment by the child) and suspension may manage and control the situation temporarily, they rarely result in sustainable positive behaviour change.

More likely, to save face, and give the defiant child a sense of control (and therefore safety) oppositional behaviour will increase, often in covert ways the school has even less chance of controlling.

To overcome the animosity that can so quickly develop between child and teacher (or staff generally) it is best to depersonalise the problem behaviour as quickly as possible. This does not mean ignoring the Code of Behaviour or the School's Discipline Policy for a particular incident. Rather it means at the same time focusing staff and children on creating a safe, respectful, supportive environment which fosters responsible behaviour towards oneself and others (for children AND adults).

The following steps summarize the process:

- Start with some laughter! Really SHARING a belly laugh totally changes any confrontational dynamic operating. Use a funny film, cartoons, joke books. Playing physical games WITH children is also a great way of changing dynamics and relieving stress. During this time look for ANY way of positively acknowledging the child: "Great catch!", "Boy can you run!", "Thanks for getting the ball", "What a great sense of humour you have". Just acknowledging their existence can make a difference "Do you like funny T.V shows?"
- Use the laughter and physical activity as a lead into discussing "what makes us feel safe and good inside", draw pictures, write, record then use this as the lead into discussing "how we treat each other".
- Simplify behavioural expectations to RESPECT and RESPONSIBILITY for self, each other and community.
(Explain how this keeps everyone FEELING safe and good about themselves compared with how we feel when we or others don't behave in these ways).
- Video the class. Tell the children we are going to see how many ways they can display respect and responsibility.

Note: Many defiant children are natural leaders (which is why they can be so threatening to teachers). If you think this is the case then put them in charge of the video or ask them to organise some role plays with other children to illustrate positive behaviour. Asking children to pretend they are the teacher with a small group of children modelling respectful behaviour vs disrespectful behaviour can create laughter as well as greater empathy.

Focus on how the children themselves feel participating and watching. They are usually surprised to realise how uncomfortable and unsafe they feel when they witness disrespect and undermining of adults. This puts them "on your side" so students and teacher form a collaborative partnership to achieve their goals.

- First watch the video yourself and look for all the opportunities there were to acknowledge (verbally or with a genuinely warm smile is sufficient) the positive behaviours you are seeking. Focus particularly on the children who tend to be defiant or passive. With these children initially you may have to recognise and acknowledge progressive approximations to the behaviour you want, ie you shape the desired behaviour (like training puppies).

(Watch as many different videos of the class and playground as you need to train yourself to automatically see and acknowledge the positive to the children. It is particularly helpful for staff to watch each others videos and see what they recognise. All of us tend to develop "blind spots" with some children or only see what we expect to see).

- Play the video to the children and get them to record all the respectful and responsible behaviour they see. (Ignore the negative). However if the children comment on negative behaviour then matter of factly acknowledge it, while reminding them they are looking for behaviour that makes

them feel “safe and good inside”. It is absolutely critical to deliberately teach the children how “right behaviour” by themselves or others makes them FEEL.

- Record the positive behaviour as a score for the class NOT individuals. Remember you are trying to depersonalise the issue and give children the emotional space to change while saving face. “Scores” can also be recorded on class “strength trees”, or “feed fido” with targets set which will result in the whole class being rewarded eg picnic, excursion, games afternoon etc.

Initially videoing on Mondays and Fridays with specific behaviours you are trying to target eg listening when someone else is speaking (respect) can give children fast feedback comparing “scores” between beginning and end of the week. Later once a month can be useful to reinforce what has been achieved. Between videos constantly acknowledge positive behaviour. The “warmer” and more genuine you can be with this acknowledgement the more YOU will feel better and the stronger the relationship you are building with all the children.

- As discussions focus on feelings extend the vocabulary with word lists. This is extremely important: If you only know the word “anger” to express distress it leaves you with only one way of responding. However if you learn that there is anger, frustration, irritation, annoyance, disappointment, grief, hurt, you can develop many ways and degrees of response.
- Use suitable lesson plans from “You Can Do It”, “Mind Matters”, “Tribes” etc to teach problem solving and coping skills.

Note:

Oppositional behaviour characterised by deliberate harm to other people or animals and calculated deceit:

The process described above will help nearly all children even where community resources are almost nonexistent and the family situation not able to be supportive. For children in these circumstances school can become the only place they feel safe and good about themselves.

However very occasionally (many teachers will never encounter such a child in their entire careers) a child will have oppositional conduct disorder. This is usually characterised by an inability to empathise with their target and is a serious condition needing referral to mental health professionals

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