

# Working With Defiant Kids: Communication Tools for Teachers



Teachers cite conflicts with defiant and noncompliant students as being a primary cause of classroom disruption. In many schools, staff believe that student misbehavior is so pervasive that it *seriously interferes with effective instruction*. This article outlines important communication tools that teachers can use to defuse (or even prevent!) confrontations with students.

## Why do classroom conflicts between teachers and students seem to occur so frequently?

Conflicts are social power struggles and must always involve at least two parties. As conflicts between *students* and *teachers* appear to be so widespread, it might help to examine what factors tend to push each party into these power struggles.

- *Students* who are prone to conflict often do poorly in school. They may act out in part to mask their embarrassment about their limited academic skills. These students may also lack basic prosocial strategies that would help them to work through everyday school difficulties. For example, students may become confrontational because they do not know how to ask for help on a difficult assignment, lack the ability to sit down with a peer and calmly talk through a problem, or are unable to negotiate politely with a teacher to get an extension on an assignment.

Students can also sometimes adopt defiance toward teachers as a *deliberate* strategy--because, in the past, this confrontational behavior seems to have 'paid off' for them in the form of reduced expectations for schoolwork or improved social standing with peers. The longer that a student has engaged in habitual confrontational behavior, the more time and energy a teacher will probably need to invest in specific strategies to turn that behavior around.

- *Teachers* who get pulled into power struggles with students may not realize that they are often simply *reacting* to student provocation. For each step that the student escalates the conflict (e.g., raising his or her voice, assuming a threatening posture), the teacher matches the step (e.g., speaking more loudly, moving into the student's personal space). In other words, a teacher allows the *student* to control the interaction.

Furthermore, if an instructor has already decided that a student is generally defiant, the teacher may be overly quick to jump to conclusions, interpreting *any* ambiguous behavior on the part of the student (e.g., muttering in frustration during a test) as intended to be deliberately confrontational (Fisher et al., 1991). The instructor may then reprimand or criticize the student, triggering a confrontation.

**What is the most important point to keep in mind when working with a defiant or noncompliant student?** The cardinal rule to keep in mind in managing conflicts with students is *to stay outwardly calm and to maintain a professional perspective*. For example, it is certainly OK to experience anger when a student deliberately attempts to insult or confront you in front of the

entire classroom. If you *react* with an angry outburst, though, the student will control the interaction, perhaps escalating the conflict until the student engineers his or her desired outcome. If you instead approach the student in a business-like, neutral manner, and impose consistent, fair consequences for misbehavior, you will model the important lesson that you cannot be pulled into a power struggle at the whim of a student.

Instructors who successfully stay calm in the face of student provocation often see two additional benefits:

1. Over time, students may become less defiant, because they no longer experience the 'reward' of watching you react in anger;
2. Because you now deal with student misbehavior impartially, efficiently and quickly, you will have more instructional time available that used to be consumed in epic power struggles.

**How do I deliver a teacher command in a way that will minimize the chance of a power struggle?** You can increase the odds that a student will follow a teacher command by:

- approaching the student privately and using a quiet voice
- establishing eye contact and calling the student by name *before* giving the command
- stating the command as a positive (*do*) statement, rather than a negative (*don't*) statement.
- phrasing the command in clear and descriptive terms (using simple language that is easily understood) so the student knows exactly what he or she is expected to do (Walker & Walker, 1991).

There are several ways that you might use to deliver a teacher command. The table below presents two sequences for teacher commands, one brief and one extended (Thompson, 1993; Walker & Walker, 1991). Your choice of which to use will depend on your own personal preference and your judgment about how a particular student will respond to each:

<i>Teacher Command Sequence (Brief)</i>	<i>Teacher Command Sequence (Extended)</i>
<p><b>1. Make the request.</b> Use simple, clear language that the student understands. If possible, phrase the request as a positive (<i>do</i>) statement, rather than a negative (<i>don't</i>) statement. (E.g., "<i>John, please start your math assignment now.</i>") Wait a reasonable time for the student to comply (e.g., 5-20 seconds)</p>	<p><b>1. Make the request.</b> Use simple, clear language that the student understands. If possible, phrase the request as a positive (<i>do</i>) statement, rather than a negative (<i>don't</i>) statement. (E.g., "<i>John, please start your math assignment now.</i>") Wait a reasonable time for the student to comply (e.g., 5-20 seconds)</p>
<p><b>2. [If the student fails to comply] Repeat the request.</b> Say to the student, "You need to..." and restate the request. (E.g., "<i>John, you need to start your math assignment now.</i>")</p> <p>Take no other action. Wait a reasonable time for the student to comply (e.g., 5-20 seconds)</p>	<p><b>2. [If the student fails to comply] Repeat the request as a 2-part choice.</b> Give the student two clear choices with clear consequences.</p> <p>Order the choices so that the student hears a pre-selected negative consequence as the first choice and the <i>teacher request</i> as the second choice. (E.g., "<i>John, you can refuse to participate in the math assignment and receive a referral to the principal's office, or you can</i></p>

	<p><i>start the math assignment now and not be written up. It's your choice.</i> ↗)</p> <p>Take no other action. Wait a reasonable time for the student to comply (e.g., 5-20 seconds)</p>
<p><b>3. [If the student fails to comply] <i>Impose a pre-selected negative consequence.</i></b> As you impose the consequence, ignore student questions or complaints that appear intended to entangle you in a power struggle.</p>	<p><b>3. [Optional-If the student fails to comply] <i>Offer a face-saving out.</i></b> Say to the student, <i>"Is there anything that I can say or do at this time to earn your cooperation?"</i> (Thompson, 1993).</p>
	<p><b>4. [If the student fails to comply] <i>Impose the pre-selected negative consequence.</i></b> As you impose the consequence, ignore student questions or complaints that appear intended to entangle you in a power struggle.</p>

### Are there other effective communication strategies that I can use with defiant students?

There are a number of supportive techniques that teachers can use to establish rapport and convey their behavioral expectations clearly to students, including:

- **Active listening.** Active listening, or paraphrasing, is the act of summarizing another person's ideas, opinions, or point of view in your own words. Students who are chronically hostile and confrontational often believe that nobody truly listens to them. When upset, they frequently interrupt the teacher because they believe that the instructor does not understand their point of view.

Active listening is powerful because it demonstrates beyond a doubt that you have not only *heard* the student's comments but that you have grasped his or her opinions so clearly that you can repeat them back to the satisfaction of the speaker. Note, though, that active listening does not imply that you necessarily *agree* with the student's point of view. Rather, it shows that you fully *comprehend* that viewpoint. Students tend to view teachers who practice active listening as being empathic, respectful, and caring individuals.

Here are some statements you can use when paraphrasing student comments:

- *"Let me be sure that I understand you correctly..."*
- *"I want to summarize the points that you made, so that I know that I heard you right..."*
- *"So from your point of view, the situation looks like this..."*

Once you have finished summarizing the student's point of view, give that student the opportunity to let you know how accurately he or she thinks you paraphrased those views: *"Does what I just said sound like your point of view?"* And don't be surprised if the student clarifies his or her position at this point. ("Well, teacher, I don't think that you really *meant* to pick on me when I walked into class late, but when you called me by name and drew attention to me, I got really embarrassed!") Though a simple communication technique, active listening can transform a potential classroom conflict into a productive student/teacher *conversation*.

One final tip about active listening: when a student is quite upset and talking very quickly, you can safely interrupt him or her, take control of the conversation, and still seem supportive by using an active listening phrase (Thompson, 1993). For example, you might interrupt a student by saying, "Whoa, just a minute! You've covered a lot of ground. Let me just try to sum up what you said so that I know that I am understanding you!"

- *I-centered statements.* When we tell oppositional students that they are engaging in inappropriate behaviors, we run the risk of having them challenge the truth of our statements or of taking offense at being criticized for their conduct. An instructor's use of *I-centered statements* can reduce the potential that teacher criticism will lead to student confrontation. Because I-centered statements reflect only the instructor's *opinions* and *viewpoints*, they are less incendiary and open to challenge than more global statements that pin blame for misbehavior on the student.

For example, rather than telling a student, "You are *always* disrupting class with your jokes and fooling around!" you may say, "Zeke, I find it difficult to keep everybody's attention when there are other conversations going on in the classroom. That's why I need you to open your book and focus on today's lesson."

- *Pairing of criticism with praise* (Thompson, 1993). Sometimes you have no choice but to let a student know directly and bluntly that his or her classroom behaviors are not acceptable. Many oppositional students, though, have experienced a painful history of rejection in personal relationships and lack close ties with adults.

No matter how supportively you present behavioral criticism to these students, they may assume that you are in fact rejecting them as individuals and react strongly to this perceived rejection. One strategy to reassure the student that you continue to value him or her as a person is to (a) describe the problem behavior that you would like to see changed, (b) clearly outline appropriate behavioral alternatives (b) praise the student about some other aspect of his or her behavior or accomplishments, and finally (c) state that you value having the student as a part of the classroom community.

Here is a demonstration of this communication strategy:

1. *Description of problem behavior:* "Trina, you said disrespectful things about other students during our class meeting this morning. You continued to do so even after I asked you to stop."
2. *Appropriate behavioral alternative(s):* "It's OK to disagree with another person's ideas. But you need to make sure that your comments do not insult or hurt the feelings of others."
3. *Specific praise:* "I am talking to you about this behavior because know that you can do better. In fact, I have really come to value your classroom comments. You have great ideas and express yourself very well."
4. *Affirmation statement:* "You are an important member of this class!"

**What are some conflict 'pitfalls' that I should watch out for?** Communication is never easy, especially when you work with students who can be defiant. You can maximize your chances for successful communication, though, if you:

- *Avoid a mismatch between your words and nonverbal signals.* Students are quick to sense when a speaker's body language and tone of voice convey a different message than his or her words. If the student reads your nonverbal signals as being disrespectful or confrontational, conflict may result. If a teacher speaks politely to a student, for example, but has his fists clenched and uses a sarcastic tone, that student is likely to discount the instructor's words and focus instead on his *nonverbal* signals. Be sure that you convey sincerity by matching your verbal message with your nonverbal cues.
- *Take time to plan your response before reacting to provocative student behavior or remarks.* It is easy to react without thinking when a student makes comments or engages in behavior that offends or upsets you. If you let anger take over, however, and blurt out the first thing that comes to mind, you may end up making "the greatest speech that you'll ever live to regret" (Thompson, 1993, p. 32). A teacher's angry response can escalate student misbehavior, resulting in a power struggle that spirals out of control. When provoked, take several seconds to collect your thoughts and to think through an appropriate, professional response before you take action.
- *Do not become entangled in a discussion or argument with a confrontational student (Walker & Walker, 1991).* Some students are very skilled at dragging teachers into discussions or arguments that turn into power struggles. When you must deliver a command to, confront, or discipline a student who is defiant or confrontational, be careful not to get 'hooked' into a discussion or argument with that student. If you find yourself being drawn into an exchange with the student (e.g., raising your voice, reprimanding the student), immediately use strategies to disengage yourself (e.g., by moving away from the student, repeating your request in a business-like tone of voice, imposing a pre-determined consequence for noncompliance).
- *Do not try to coerce or force the student to comply.* It is a mistake to use social pressure (e.g., reprimands, attempting to stare down students, standing watch over them) or physical force to make a confrontational student comply with a request (Walker & Walker, 1991). The student will usually resist and a power struggle will result. In particular, adults should *not* lay hands on a student to force compliance--as the student will almost certainly view this act as a serious physical threat and respond in kind.

### **What are proactive steps that I can take to head off or minimize conflict with students?**

The best way to handle a student conflict is to prevent it from occurring altogether: Some ideas to accomplish this are to:

- *Offer the student face-saving exit strategies.* According to Fisher, et al. (1993), "face-saving reflects a person's need to reconcile the stand he takes in a negotiation or agreement with his principles and with his past words and deeds" (p. 29). When a potential confrontation looms, you can give a student a face-saving way out by phrasing your request in a way that lets the student preserve his or her self-image even as the student complies.

A teacher, for example, who says to a student, "Rashid, take out your book now and pay attention--or I will send you to the office!" backs the student into a corner. The student

cannot comply without appearing to have done so merely to avoid the threatened disciplinary consequence (that is, prompt compliance would probably result in Rashid's losing face with his peers). The teacher might instead use this face-saving alternative: "Rashid, please take out your book now and pay attention. We need to make sure that you do well on the upcoming test so that you continue to be eligible to play on the lacrosse team. They need your talent!"

- *Act in positive ways that are inconsistent with the student's expectations (Fisher, et al., 1991).* Because they have experienced so many disappointments in school, confrontational students may believe that teachers do not take a personal interest in them or value their classroom contributions. You can surprise these students and begin to forge more positive relationships by showing through your actions that you do indeed value them. You might, for example, occasionally bring in articles from popular magazines on topics that you know will interest the student, set aside time for weekly individual conferences to be sure that the student understands and is making progress on all assignments, or take a couple of minutes each day to engage the student in social conversation. Each such small 'random act of kindness' will probably not instantly change a teacher-student relationship. Over time, however, such acts will demonstrate your empathy and caring--and are likely to have a cumulative, powerful, and positive impact on the student.
- *Select fair behavioral consequences in advance (Walker & Walker, 1991).* When you are face-to-face with a confrontational student, it can be a challenge to remain impartial and fair in choosing appropriate consequences for misbehavior. Instead, take time *in advance* to set up a classwide menu of positive consequences for good behaviors and negative consequences for misbehavior. Be sure that all students understand what those consequences are. Then be consistent in applying those consequences to individual cases of student misbehavior.
- *Avoid making task demands of students when they are upset.* Students will be much more likely to become confrontational if you approach them with a task demand at a time when they are already frustrated or upset. When possible, give agitated students a little breathing room to collect themselves and calm down before giving them commands (Walker & Walker, 1993).

## References

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