

## **Improve Classroom Management with Consequences**

“I’ll tell you exactly what they need... a bloody good clip round the ear!”

This was the response of a taxi driver recently when I told him I was on my way to a school to discuss how to improve pupil behaviour. It is a popular view.

Every school staffroom around the world is filled with different opinions on how the issue of bad behaviour should be tackled but an alarming number of teachers feel the answer lies in adopting a punitive stance.

The infliction of physical pain as a deterrent to unwanted behaviour was abolished in schools around 50 years ago which has left many teachers practically powerless when dealing with challenging pupils purely and simply because they still rely on a reactive, punitive approach.

“We can’t cane them so what *can* we do?”...is the cry of many frustrated teachers. An interesting point is that some teachers wouldn’t need to cane them even if it was still allowed.

One definition of insanity is ‘doing the same thing day after day and expecting a different result’ and there are some teachers who shout at, threaten, belittle, embarrass and unfairly punish difficult pupils whilst holding on to the deluded thought that more of the same will eventually bring about a positive change.

I can see four main drawbacks with the hostile/punitive approach:

Firstly it relies on a ‘punisher’ being present and therefore doesn’t promote self-monitoring - responsibility is taken away from the pupil. A focus on ‘controlling’ pupils through punishment will breed, at best, reluctant compliance.

Anyone can ‘make’ a child behave – with a harsh enough punishment - but this form of control doesn’t promote or teach good behaviour; it merely says ‘don’t do that!’ and does nothing to clarify the *how* and *why* of appropriate action. In these days of ineffective parenting, hedonistic attitudes and a media obsessed with smut and violence many young people simply haven’t been shown ‘how’ to behave appropriately and have no self-motivation to do so. If we want behaviour to improve we need to develop responsibility in our young; external control through punishment (and rewards for that matter) simply takes it away from them.

Secondly it only produces a temporary reduction in the unacceptable behaviour. Once the punishment has stopped the behaviour often resumes... leading to an increasingly frustrated member of staff. Logic dictates that with a punitive/hostile approach, if a mild punishment doesn’t work, the level of punishment must be increased until it has the desired effect. It begs the question: “Where on earth do we draw the line?”

Thirdly it damages the all-important teacher/pupil relationship. Those who adopt the punitive/hostile approach when dealing with pupils tend to see relationships as a waste of valuable time and aren’t concerned about the feelings of the pupils they teach. It’s ironic that these teachers are often the ones who complain most about standards of behaviour in school.

On the other hand, teachers who choose to see ‘problem’ pupils as ‘pupils with problems’ and reach out with offers of support, assistance, trust and respect generally have the most success in terms of preventing and dealing with incidents of bad behaviour. Those who see positive relationships as an essential part of teaching can often perform miracles with the most challenging pupils – without need for punishments, without complicated and intricate reward systems and no matter how disorganised, unstructured or incomplete the school’s policy is for managing behaviour.

Finally, and perhaps most worryingly from the point of view of a teacher, excessive punishment increases fear, distrust and resentment among pupils... sometimes even the desire to take revenge.

While it's true that punishments can make compliant, normally well-behaved children follow rules, they can cause strong-willed non-compliant children to rebel. A simple way of looking at it is that punishments only tend to work with those children who already behave but don't work on those who need to *learn* to behave. I received my fair share of canings, whippings and slaps as a youngster – both in and out of school - and can say hand on heart that it didn't make me behave better. It simply made me more adept at not getting caught and sowed the seeds of revenge and disgust towards those who tried to control me.

### **What is the answer?**

Ok, so punishments aren't the answer. What is? Surely I'm not suggesting we let them off whenever they do something wrong?

No. I'm suggesting two very rational alternatives.

First - focus on *preventing* behaviour problems from arising in the first place. Second - '*teach*' kids to behave responsibly through *consistent* boundaries and fair, sensible consequences. Like I said, this isn't rocket science.

Preventing problems comes naturally to committed teachers. From a positive attitude that sees problems as learning opportunities they continually strive to help challenging pupils. They set up a consistent framework of rules and routines to automate their classrooms and provide necessary boundaries. They then focus on meeting pupil needs through clear communication, positive relationships, encouragement, recognition and highly engaging activities, whilst operating as role models for the behaviour they expect. When these factors are in place, problems are kept to a minimum. The needs-focused approach at [www.behaviourneeds.com](http://www.behaviourneeds.com) goes into this in more detail but the bottom line is this... when needs are being met there are fewer reasons to misbehave.

Regardless of how much we focus on prevention we are undoubtedly going to experience problems in class and that's where consequences come in. Consequences turn problems into learning opportunities.

Consequences are a respectful, fair, democratic response to misbehaviour. Unlike punishments they don't ridicule, they don't embarrass, they don't humiliate and they aren't unfair. Kids are quick to notice unfair and unwarranted punishments metered out by angry teachers and just as quick to voice their opinion in response to this. The teacher who goes over the top in terms of punishment or embarrassment given to a single pupil can find the whole class turning against them. And that can suddenly make a relatively small problem about 35 times bigger. Consequences are different because they focus on the behaviour being displayed, not on the child. All too often teachers slip into labeling young people because of their behaviour and this has the effect of making punishments seem like personal attacks.

Above all consequences teach responsibility and accountability – they teach the behaviour we want to see. It's often said that life is the greatest teacher and sensible, well-thought-out consequences help young people learn from their own mistakes.

Consequences generally involve *temporary* removal or *limited* access to whatever was causing the problem and thereby teach that correct behaviour leads to a more desirable outcome. Here is a selection of consequences, together with an example of a punitive alternative.

#### **If they misuse or break equipment: take it away from them for a short while:**

"Stop swinging on your chair. If you do it again I'll take your chair away and you can sit on the floor/stand for ten minutes."

"You know you're not supposed to wear a hat in school. Put it in your bag or it goes in my bag until the end of school."

"Put your headphones away or I will keep them in my locker until the end of the day."

**Punitive:**

“Right that’s it! I’ve told you about headphones in class. I’m taking those and you can get them back when I’m ready!”

”You’ve lost those now until the end of term!”

“Get that hat off now you look ridiculous and it’s against school rules! Go and stand outside the staffroom until I’m ready to come and get you!”

**If they are late or are costing you time, take away some of their time:**

“Vicky you are 3 minutes late for the lesson. You will be leaving 3 minutes after everyone else.”

“Simon you’ve wasted 5 minutes of lesson time. You will return at the start of break time to do five minutes work.”

**Punitive:** “I’m sick of you wasting my time! See how you like it – you’ve got detention every lunch time this week!”

**If they abuse privileges, remove the privilege for a while:**

“You girls were allowed to sit in the canteen area at break time with the agreement that you wouldn’t fool around. You’ve lost that privilege for 1 week.”

**Punitive:** “I trusted you to behave and you’ve shown that you can’t. You can no longer stay in during break!”

**If they display inappropriate behaviour, have them practice behaving appropriately:**

“Daniel you were told not to run in the corridor. You will spend break time practicing walking instead of running.”

“All five of you have taken far too long to line up quietly. Come to my room at the start of break and we’ll spend ten minutes practicing.”

**Punitive:** “Don’t run! I said DON’T RUN! Right, you’ve got yourself two detentions – one for running and one for ignoring me!”

**If they disrupt activities, separate them from the activity temporarily:**

“You’ve shown me that you can’t work sensibly as part of your group. You can sit next to me and work on your own for the next ten minutes. When you’ve managed to do that I’ll let you return to the group.”

**Punitive:** “Get OUT!!!”

Teachers are educated people and yet many don’t seem to be able to grasp this – the more you make life uncomfortable for pupils and the more you rely on punitive measures, the worse they will treat you and the harder your job will become. Bottom line: If you want an easier life in the classroom, ditch the punitive/hostile approach.