



The Needs-Focused Approach to Preventing Behaviour Problems

Have you ever asked yourself why some teachers seem to be able to handle the difficult classes better than others, and why they get respect that others don't? Do you ever wonder why some teachers find the job so enjoyable while others find it so stressful and frustrating?

When I first started teaching I was always amazed (and I have to say a little jealous) by the way some members of staff could get even the most challenging class to obey their every command. Perhaps 'obey' is the wrong choice of word. The kids in their charge didn't so much *obey* them; that conjures up an image of them following commands out of fear. No, these teachers didn't rule with fear. They didn't need to resort to such futile tactics, because they had students eating out of the palms of their hands.

These teachers were the pied pipers of the school building, the ones who were sought out at break times for a chat, the ones who the rough, the mad, the bad and the sad all respected – equally. When these teachers walked into a classroom for a cover lesson the mood was immediately upbeat and at the request "quiet please, let's make a start", a respectful hush soon followed. The males of this rare breed of teacher would always get a nod in the corridor from the 'hard lads' while the ladies would be greeted by an "alright Miss?" or a door help politely open. "Wow!" I used to think, "How do they do that? Why is it that they can get respect from these kids – even the *really* difficult ones?"

So I asked them. Not the teachers, the kids. I decided that if I was going to find out what these teachers had that was so appealing to the kids, the best people to ask were the kids themselves. I asked them directly and I gave them questionnaires. Every class and every pupil I taught, from ages 11 to 18, for the first few years of my teaching career was asked the same question...

"What are the features of the best teacher you've ever met?"

On the questionnaires I probed further. I wanted to know what sort of things these teachers said, what they did, what teaching methods they used, what strategies they used to help kids when they were down, how they used humour in the classroom, how they encouraged them to work harder, how they got them to follow instructions, what they did that made them smile.

Call me obsessive but there was a hidden agenda: these teachers were enjoying their careers far more than the majority of my colleagues. The kids enjoyed being taught by them and they enjoyed coming to work to teach them. To me that spelled success, purpose, happiness and less stress. I wanted the same.

The results won't surprise you, as they didn't me. All the usual requirements were there. The features the pupils said they wanted to see were, in no particular order...

- They treat us in a nice, friendly manner.

- They recognise when we do something right.
- They can have a laugh and are cheerful.
- They give out information in a fun and interesting way.
- They trust us.
- They're firm and fair.
- They have the same rules for everyone.
- They are always in control.
- They are there for us, they care, they listen.

As I said, no surprises – and yet this short list holds the key to your success as a teacher and classroom manager. The teacher who has all these attributes and consistently displays them will have far fewer problems to deal with in the classroom. It is as simple as that. The secret of behaviour management is preventing the majority of problems from happening in the first place.

It took me a long time to realize the *real* importance of this, however. Years after confining my little questionnaires to a file somewhere it suddenly dawned on me that the reason these teachers were having such an easy time in the classroom went way below the surface of merely providing interesting lessons, being firm and fair etc. Taken collectively, there is an important reason why these key attributes are so effective in preventing problems and making students feel content – they satisfy 3 *critical* psychological needs.

Most teachers will be familiar with Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. It suggests that we all have basic needs and that as a group of needs are met or satisfied, we move up to the next level. The lowest level consists of our most basic needs - shelter, food and water. Our needs for safety are on the next level up. Then we progress into the realms of psychological needs, and this is where it gets interesting.

Psychologists list a wide variety of needs under this heading – from the need to achieve through the need to contribute, to the need for love and a whole host of others in between. We can boil them down to just three to make life easy. I like easy and I'm sure you do too!

The first group of needs falls under the heading '**Empowerment**' and encompasses recognition, freedom, autonomy, achievement, contribution, choice and competence. If these needs aren't being met we will feel '**Powerless**' and frustrated in any given situation. Second is the need for '**Fun**' and includes the need for curiosity, interest, growth and learning, adventure, amusement, surprise, variety. If this need goes unmet we feel bored, lethargic, switched off. Finally, the most important need by far is the need to '**Belong**' – to be accepted, valued, appreciated, needed, related to or connected with something beyond oneself. In short, the need to be loved. If this need goes unmet we feel lost, uncared for, lonely, isolated, vulnerable, let down and inferior.

The important thing to remember here is that these needs **HAVE** to be met. They are as important to us as food and water if we are to live full and satisfying lives. Most, if not all, of the children we teach get their basic needs for air, water, food, shelter and even safety met as a matter of course, both in the home and at school. But when we get into the higher levels of social and self-esteem needs the picture is a little different. Some of our young people are growing up in our societies without these needs being met. These youths form the more troubled members of any group, they are the difficult, the vulnerable, the confused, the let down; the mad, the bad and the sad.

These are the kids who cause problems in lessons: the silly ones who look for attention; the mischievous ones who play pranks and mess around; the devious ones who go out of their way to make life miserable for others; and the switched off ones who just couldn't care less. These

children present problems because they have problems themselves. They are driven by some compelling urge to act the way they do and I believe the needs theory explains it all.

For these kids life isn't easy. They are missing something. For them home isn't a balanced loving place of support, moral teachings and kindness. But while their backgrounds may be very different from other, more compliant and well behaved members of the class, they have exactly the same needs. The teachers who meet these needs will reach them very quickly and manage to keep control in the classroom. For the teachers who don't, it's a different story.

Let's look at the simple example of a teacher who doesn't consider it important to provide interesting lessons. Instead they simply hand out worksheets, day in, day out. They offer no variety of activity, they don't use (or even allow) humour, there is no sense of discovery, no choice in the seating arrangements, no movement, no challenge, no music, no colour, no adventure, no dynamism, no curious props, no energizer, no warm-up activity, no break... NO FUN! Instead they present a monotonous stream of text-based work which is in total misalignment with the preferred learning style of many of the pupils in the class.

The need for **fun** has to be met and clearly this lesson format is not going to do it. The need for fun is a primeval, subconscious thirst which needs quenching. One way is by looking for fun outside the learning activity. Perhaps there's something more interesting happening outside the window, or on one of the other tables in the classroom. Attention wanders. The kids look for ways to make their own fun. Doodling might do the trick. Passing notes under the table might entertain for a while. Sooner or later the desire for amusement will lead to increasingly disruptive activities. If the teacher doesn't provide the fun through the lesson activity for a lively group, you can bet the pupils will meet their need for fun and excitement in other, less appropriate ways.

Returning to this 'worksheet' example we discover that while some of the pupils find this work far too easy and are bored to tears, others find the work, together with the confusing instructions, almost impossible to fathom. They can't make sense of it. They feel confused and frustrated and consequently totally **powerless**.

The teacher has offered no choice or freedom in the way the work is to be presented or tackled; and let's face it, there is limited variation in the way you can fill out a worksheet. The teacher offers little, if any valuable feedback or encouragement, nor does he recognise or praise pupils who attempt the work. Beyond the academic pedagogical side of the classroom this teacher also gives no responsibility to the kids. We all know that the louder members of any groups, those that tend to cause us problems, also tend to have a great capacity for leadership. By giving them some responsibility in the classroom we not only fulfill their desperate need for attention and recognition (both needs under the 'empowerment' umbrella), we also make life easier for ourselves as they are less driven to get these needs met by clowning around and causing problems. But that doesn't happen in this classroom because the teacher sees no point in giving these kids a responsibility.

The kids aren't included in any of the routines either, so a simple but effective way of both empowering them and creating a sense of belonging is missed. Indeed there are no routines. It is chaos.

This teacher is also very hostile in the way he deals with problems. He is condescending to the pupils, belittles them, makes sarcastic comments, he shouts. Again this undermines the pupils and

makes them feel powerless. It takes away their sense of identity. They feel persecuted. They feel that they're being treated unfairly.

How can kids succeed and gain a sense of achievement when the work is either too complicated or difficult, or perhaps even too simple and boring? If they're given no freedom in the way this work is to be presented and have no input in any of the classroom activities, their lack of autonomy and choice will again make them feel powerless. The need for empowerment still has to be met and these pupils will get their need for power satisfied - one way or another.

They may decide that their way is to simply opt out; this act in itself is quite empowering. By opting out they are making their own choice and dictating terms in the classroom. Alternatively the way may be to complain or misbehave; again, they are making their own choices and gaining power from doing so. If the teacher doesn't meet their need for empowerment by giving them chances to succeed and achieve (with support and appropriate work), recognition (in the form of praise, encouragement and responsibility, support), they will seek other ways of getting this need satisfied.

Finally, they need **to belong**. This need, more than any other is missing from many of our vulnerable and most difficult students' lives – not just in the classroom, but sadly at home too. The main reason why kids form gangs is to meet this one need. The drive to be part of a group, connected to something, valued, appreciated, heaven forbid call it 'loved' - is essential to all human beings. We all positively *need* to be loved.

The worksheet teacher ignores this fact. He ignores the fact that teamwork, co-operative work and peer support systems will give pupils a sense of community. He ignores the fact that positive relationships are a sure-fire way to get the most from any under-performing pupil and are the foundation of any successful discipline plan. He can't be bothered to spend a little extra time taking an interest in these pupils, talking with them and making them feel valued. He ignores the fact that giving his pupils a voice, giving them support and making them feel a valuable part of the school environment, is *essential* if they are to feel content, to feel safe, and to be less inclined to attack a system they feel is inherently against them. All that is too much trouble. It is far easier to hand out a worksheet, and with it the instruction to "get on with your work!"

... but it is not easier at all, because this is the teacher who dreads coming to school every morning; the teacher who spends every break time complaining about the 'uncontrollable kids'; the teacher who is often ridiculed and insulted on a daily basis, and wonders why. The easier way might take a little more effort, but pays the dividends.

My mother always put it like this...

"Life is like a teapot. You get out of it what you put in."

She was, of course, talking about 'attitude'. If you put weak tea bags in the pot, you get nothing of worth back out of it. It is so sad that many teachers think they can turn up to class with super-cheap tea bags in the form of dull work (and grumpy persona to match) and expect compliant, thoroughly engaged pupils in return. You know that it doesn't work like that. You know that to receive, you have to give first, and the best teachers do this. They give, they meet needs. They adopt those crucial features outlined above, and in doing so prevent the majority of behaviour problems from ever taking place.

Common sense dictates that prevention of problems is better than cure - and *that*, in essence, is what the needs-focused approach to classroom management is all about. To learn more about the needs-focused approach visit: www.Behaviourneeds.com