Dealing With the Unexpected

Dr Fred Jones  This article is condensed from Dr. Jones' award winning book Tools for Teaching. Illustrations by Brian Jones for Tools for Teaching.

THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT YOU EXPECT
In our previous segments, we have examined Meaning Business -- mobility, proximity, calmness, assertive body language and keeping your mouth shut when dealing with backtalk. Those skills will serve you well, not only in the classroom but throughout your life, whenever you are in a position of leadership.

No set of skills comes with a guarantee, however. Certain individuals in certain situations will respond atypically. In this segment, we will examine a type of child whose response to "meaning business" will be the opposite of what you might expect.

EXTREME CLINGING
It was the first week of school, and the first grade teacher was just getting to know her students. She was working the crowd as the students did an art project at their desks. One little boy, who seemed quite immature, was fooling around at his desk; off in his own little world. The teacher stood at the child’s desk for a moment waiting to be noticed.

When the boy failed to look up, the teacher bent down and rested one hand on the desktop in order to give him a prompt. When the student looked up and saw the teacher’s arm in front of him, he wrapped his arms around her forearm and rubbed his face against her sleeve. He continued to do this for nearly five seconds. Sometimes in body language you get the opposite of what you expect. If you only know the basics of body language, you might think, “It’s not working.” But body language is always “working.” Sometimes, however, it produces a surprising result.

A NEON SIGN
Israel Goldiamond, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, used to have a saying concerning the symptomatology of clinical disorders. He would say, “A symptom is a neon sign pointing to its own cure.” To our group of young psychologists he explained, “If a person is acting in a bizarre fashion, it is for a reason. What do they get for the behavior? Whatever it is, they must want it very badly. Find out what it is, and make sure that they can only get it by acting appropriately.”

Dr. Goldiamond’s analysis proved unerringly true. You would do well to take it to heart. When a child in your classroom acts in a bizarre or atypical fashion, the child is telling you a great deal about his or her life. If you can decode the message, you can understand what would otherwise seem inexplicable. And you will have the beginning of a treatment program.

TERRY CLOTH MOTHERS
When the child described above wrapped his arms around the teacher’s forearm and rubbed his face on her sleeve, the image that came to mind was of baby monkeys and their terry cloth mothers. This image is embossed in the memory of any student who has ever taken an introductory course in psychology.

Baby monkeys who were deprived of their mothers’ presence made surrogate mothers out of the softest object they could find. That object was a terry cloth towel. They would curl up on it and rub against it in an effort to derive the touch that they were being denied. Like the baby monkeys, children who are socially deprived often seek attention and touch in ways that we might consider bizarre. As a result, they read body language differently than normal children do.

INDISCRIMINATE RESPONDING
To understand the behavior of the needy first-grader in our example, think of him as being “starved for attention.” Starvation, in fact, provides us with the perfect analogy. Imagine yourself going to a new restaurant. Have you ever read through the entire menu two or three times before finally making your selection? This is the behavior of a well-fed person. You are highly discriminating.

Imagine, in contrast, that you had not eaten in a week. Someone offers you some food -- the only food available -- a turkey sandwich. Can you imagine yourself saying, “No, thank you. I prefer roast beef.”? To the contrary, you would probably “wolf it down,” caring only that it is food. Under conditions of severe deprivation, we become indiscriminate consumers.

When children suffer from severe neglect, they become indiscriminate consumers of adult proximity and attention. They fail to read the nuances of body language that would signal approval versus disapproval -- something that normal children do automatically. Rather, they “wolf it down,” caring only that an adult is close enough to provide touch.
DEALING WITH EXTREME ATTENTION SEEKING

When things go completely awry, it makes even the most experienced teachers feel as though they have somehow done something wrong. However, those situations are laden with information that can give us more effective ways of responding to that situation the next time.

The little boy’s strange body language told us much that was sad about his life. His extreme neediness has neglect written all over it. As Dr. Goldiamond said, “People are bizarre for a reason.” Understand the reason, and you will have the beginning of a treatment program. Unfortunately, the treatment program is not always pleasant for us. When we perceive the extreme neediness of deprived children, we instinctively want to heal them. We want to somehow give them the attention and love they have been denied in order to make them whole. That is magical thinking on our part, and it can be destructive.

Because those children are so needy of human interaction, literally any interaction that you have with them will be reinforcing. Beware! It will reinforce whatever is happening at the time of the interaction. If, for example, you were to interact with the boy described above because he was whining or crying or hitting, you would inadvertently reinforce whining or crying or hitting. The intent of your interaction is irrelevant. The fact that these children are indiscriminate consumers of your attention means that normal behavior on your part can easily function as a reinforcement error. Not being able to discriminate disapproval, the child may act inappropriately more often in the future in order to get the proximity that comes with your limit-setting.

As students get older, their attention seeking can acquire a more antisocial flavor. Yet, whether clingy or acting out, students with an extreme need for attention probably will be present in any classroom in which you teach. Rather than giving your attention to those children unconditionally, you must be very careful that you only reinforce appropriate behavior.

Meet Fred Jones

Dr. Fred Jones received his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from UCLA, specializing in work with schools and families, and has pioneered research into classroom management in both regular and special education classrooms. The non-adversarial management procedures Dr. Jones developed are presented in his books Positive Classroom Discipline and Positive Classroom Instruction. His most recent book, Tools for Teaching, offers an updated description of classroom management in which the prevention of discipline problems and training children to be responsible place discipline management within a positive and affirming context. Click to read a complete bio.