Responding to Misbehavior

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No matter how carefully we teach positive behavior, students will still sometimes misbehave. They'll forget the rules, their impulses will win out over their self-control, or they'll just need to test where the limits are. For example: Janna rolls her eyes and snickers as Hector shares details of his weekend visit with his cousin during *Morning Meeting.* William takes a pencil from a neighbor's desk and refuses to return it when asked by his classmate. Annie grabs the ball from two smaller children, telling them they're not allowed to play.

As they learn to negotiate social expectations, children test limits, get carried away, forget, and make mistakes. In fact, having these experiences—and seeing how adults respond to them—is one way children learn about how to behave. Just as when we teach academics, we can use students' behavioral mistakes as opportunities for learning. To do this well, however, we adults must hold on to empathy for the child who misbehaves while holding her accountable. We also need to respond to misbehavior in ways that show all of our students that we will keep them safe and see to it that classroom rules are observed.

**Goals for Responding to Misbehavior**

In the *Responsive Classroom* approach to discipline, the overarching goal is to keep the focus on learning, while maintaining a classroom that's physically and emotionally safe for all. To achieve this, responses to misbehavior should:

- Stop the misbehavior and reestablish positive behavior as quickly as possible
- Maintain children's dignity
- Develop children's self-control and self-regulation skills
- Help children recognize and fix any harm caused by their mistakes
- Demonstrate that rules help make the classroom a safe place where all can learn

In classrooms where this approach is used, adults respond quickly, firmly, and respectfully when children misbehave. Minor problems are addressed before behavior gets out of control. Children are held accountable for their behavior, with adults guiding their learning so they can make better choices next time.

**Strategies for Responding to Misbehavior**

One of the most important things to keep in mind when responding to misbehavior is to address the behavior as quickly as possible. When children's behavior goes off track, they need immediate feedback from adults to help them break their momentum and get back on track. Although this might sound obvious, adults often let small misbehaviors go, waiting to address them until they've escalated and are much more difficult to reverse.

Three response strategies that are especially effective when used before misbehavior escalates (and that also meet the other goals named above) are visual and verbal cues, increased teacher proximity, and logical consequences.

**1. Visual and Verbal Cues**

Once teachers have modeled expected behaviors and given children opportunities for practice, a visual or verbal cue will often stop a misbehavior and help a child get back on track. Simply looking briefly into a child's eyes can powerfully send the message that "I know you know how to do this; now let's see you do it." Other examples of visual cues are a writing gesture for "This is writing workshop; get to work" or a finger against your lips for "Remember, silent lips when someone is sharing."

Verbal cues can be as simple as saying the child’s name. Reminding language can also be highly effective: *Sonya, what should you be doing right now? Dante, what do our rules say about sharing materials?*

Reminding language works best when a child is just beginning to go off track—about to open a book instead of getting out math materials, or beginning to reach to take the blue crayon away from a tablemate. If, however, the child is well into the undesired behavior, reminding language loses its effectiveness. At that
point, a clear redirection is needed: Sonya, put the book away now and get out your math materials. Dante, choose another color. It's Ellen's turn to use the blue crayon.

2. Increased Teacher Proximity
Sometimes all that's needed to reestablish positive behavior is for the teacher to move next to a child. For example, if children have been taught how to sit safely in chairs, and Maria has just started tipping her chair back during direct instruction, simply moving to stand by Maria can communicate "Sit safely" without drawing undue attention to Maria or disturbing other children. Once Maria sits safely, the teacher's staying nearby for a bit helps the child understand that she must continue to sit safely.

Bringing the child closer, instead of going to the child, is another option. Suppose Darren turns around and begins fiddling with items on a shelf during Morning Meeting. The class has learned meeting rules, and they also know that their teacher will sometimes direct them to change their seats if they're beginning to misbehave. A quiet "Darren, come sit next to me" brings Darren to his teacher's side in the circle and gets his attention back on his classmates, without breaking the meeting rhythm.

3. Logical Consequences
Logical consequences are another strategy that teachers can use to stop misbehavior while helping children see and take responsibility for the effects of their actions. Logical consequences differ from punishment in that, unlike punishment, logical consequences are relevant (directly related to the misbehavior), realistic (something the child can reasonably be expected to do and that the teacher can manage with a reasonable amount of effort), and respectful (communicated kindly and focused on the misbehavior, not the child's character or personality). Suppose Jinghua scribbles on her desk. Having her clean the desk would be a relevant, realistic, and respectful logical consequence. Having her miss recess would be irrelevant. Having her clean every desk in the classroom after school would be an unrealistic amount of work, and the uncleanness of the other desks is unrelated to Jinghua's mistake. Saying "You're so rude—you just don't care about anyone but yourself!" would be a disrespectful attack on her character.

(To learn more about logical consequences and how to use them, see Rules in School and other resources for teaching positive behavior listed at the end of this article.)

Introducing the Approach to Children
The Responsive Classroom approach to responding to misbehavior is most effective when children know in advance what to expect from their teachers. It's important for the teacher to let children know that at one point or another, everyone makes behavior mistakes and needs support to get back on track, and that's okay—just as it's okay to make mistakes when learning academic skills. It's also important for the teacher to convey the belief that students can and will learn to choose positive behaviors, and that their responses to their mistakes will help them do so. Choice of words, along with a friendly, matter-of-fact tone and a few specific examples, will help get this message across. For example, when talking about responses to misbehavior, a teacher might say:

We're all working on following our classroom rules, but we all make mistakes sometimes. In our class, when you don't follow a rule, it's my job to help you get back on track, fix any problems you caused, and learn to follow the rule next time. So, for example, if you forget our rule about staying safe and start running and knock down someone's block tower, I might tell you to help them rebuild . . .

Or, with older students:
If I see that you are about to break a rule, I may use a signal to help you realize that you are getting out of control. It's not a big deal; it just means you need to check your behavior and get back on track. For instance, I might put my finger on my lips to remind you to be quiet, or I may just say your name and give you a look if I think you know what to do. If I give you a signal like that, I'm giving you a chance to correct your mistake quickly and quietly, without disrupting anyone else's learning.

Knowing Which Strategy to Use
Knowing which strategy to use, and whether more than one strategy is needed, is a skill that comes with practice and depends upon the teacher's knowledge of the children she's teaching. One child who's talking when she shouldn't may need only a cue to correct herself. Another child may need a logical consequence for the same behavior. Or the same child may need a cue on one day and a logical consequence on another. Some questions to consider: Which strategy will stop the misbehavior and restore positive behavior as quickly, simply, and kindly as possible? Which strategy will maintain safety and order for everyone? Which one will help the child develop understanding and self-control?
Whichever strategies are chosen, it's important to remember to use them early, just as misbehavior begins. Doing so will prevent problems from mushrooming or becoming entrenched.

Try, Try Again
Responding to misbehavior is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching. Even the most experienced teachers make mistakes. But just as we allow students to make mistakes, we must allow ourselves to make them, too. And then, just as we do with students, we must allow ourselves to try again without judgment, in the spirit of learning to do it better next time.

Teaching Positive Behavior: Selected Resources

**Books**
- *Rules in School*
- *Responsive School Discipline*
- *The Power of Our Words*
- *Solving Thorny Behavior Problems*

**Articles & Blog posts**
- "Fruitful Mistakes"
- "Rules Talk"
- "The Power in a Teacher's Choice of Words"
- "Behavior Challenges in the Homestretch? Interactive Modeling Can Help"
- "Punishment vs. Logical Consequences"
- "Three Types of Logical Consequences"