At the beginning of first grade, Erick was a sweet, thoughtful boy who struggled with self-control. From the first days of school, his actions revealed his caring nature: He consoled a classmate after a stubbed toe, he helped others pick up, he used our letter-writing center to write charming notes to me and to his friends: "Dear Nelson, I like the way you read your book today. Love, Erick."

But Erick also had many challenging behaviors. He took things without asking, and at work time he would leave his seat and wander around, touching things. He had trouble sitting still on the rug, and he called out constantly. He was easily upset: If he tried to stay quiet for a long time, or his friends were not playing the way he wanted, or the work he was doing was too taxing, he would push his chair in with too much force, or shove other children, or kick.

The disruptive behaviors were so frequent that they threatened to overshadow his sweet side. There was much to like about Erick, but at the beginning of his first grade year his lack of self-control was a challenge for me, for his classmates, and for Erick himself. For instance, there was the day Erick gave me a ceramic vase shaped like a swan. I made a place for it on my desk, and he proudly explained that he had saved his ice cream money to buy it. At recess, he picked flowers to put in it. Then, later, when one of his classmates tried to touch the swan vase, he hit her. And so, as often happened, a day that had begun well ended with Erick in the principal's office.

Erick and I worked on improving his self-control all year long. I genuinely liked him, and I'm sure that contributed to the progress we made, which was slow but real. However, there were also plenty of times when I felt frustrated. I hope that sharing some of the things I did to stay focused and positive will help you when you have a child with challenging behaviors in your class.

Start by getting to know the child
I started by observing Erick carefully. My goal was to gain a better understanding of his personality and his strengths. I noticed that he took great delight in being in school, although many aspects of first grade did not come easily to him. He was excited to learn, keenly aware of classroom routines, and asked lots of questions. He took pride in his work and enjoyed drawing pictures of his life. When he was calm, he was a thoughtful, caring friend to his classmates.

I also noticed that Erick thrived on positive interactions with adults. Although he clearly relished one-on-one time with me, he did not always have to be the center of attention—he also loved read-alouds, and when I joined a soccer game at recess, he marveled about it for days afterwards. Seeing this reinforced my commitment to keep my core relationship with Erick positive and supportive. When his behavior frustrated or upset me, I tried to separate my feelings about what had just happened from my positive feelings about him.

This did not mean that I only spoke sweetly to Erick. He often needed to hear my firm teacher voice to realize that his actions were problematic. When Erick acted impulsively, it was usually because his desires felt so strong that he wasn't able to think about anything or anyone else. By calmly stopping his behavior with a firm voice, or a gentle hand on his shoulder, or by taking away the object that was causing the problem, I provided Erick with a cue and an opportunity to refocus. This sort of redirection worked best when I provided it in a caring, no-nonsense manner.

Watch for and acknowledge small signs of progress
All of Erick's initial signs of improvement were small. He'd ask a friend nicely to share a marker, but before he heard the answer, he'd snatch it from her hand. He'd wait patiently in line for water, but just before it was his turn, he'd push the child in front of him. If I hadn't been actively looking for small signs of improvement, I probably would have reacted only to the problem behaviors—the snatching and pushing—without noticing the signs of progress that preceded them.

Erick needed me to tell him when I noticed him using self-control, even if only for a few moments. So in situations like these, I'd respond to the misbehavior—for instance, by taking the snatched marker away—but I'd also try to reinforce the positive behavior I'd noticed—by pointing out to Erick that I'd heard him use words to ask for the marker, just as we'd learned. Then I would remind him that he needed to listen for his friend's answer after he asked his question.

Such positive reinforcements gave Erick the confidence he needed to persist in his learning. Sharing positives with Erick helped me keep going, too. When I shared positive observations with Erick, his appreciation warmed my heart and helped me stay focused on him—the sweet, earnest boy who was slowly learning a new way of doing things—rather than on his negative behaviors.

Focus on the skills the child needs to learn
Here's another example: When he started first grade, Erick called out constantly. We worked for weeks just to get him to raise his hand—but even after he started getting the hang of that, he still called out! Now he did it with his hand raised! It was hard not to feel
frustrated, but when I reflected on the situation I realized that Erick had made progress: he'd learned to use his raised hand as a signal that he had something to say. To keep from calling out, he needed to learn an additional skill—how to wait.

I pointed out the progress Erick had made on hand-raising before we moved on to tackling that. I took him aside and told him that I'd noticed that he'd been raising his hand when he had something to say, just as we'd practiced. I asked him what he had noticed, too. Then, once we'd established that he had done well on the hand-raising, I asked if he remembered why we used the raised hand signal, and why waiting to be called on was necessary. Once I felt certain he understood why waiting his turn was necessary, we thought about strategies he could use to keep himself from blurring out. He chose one to try, and I made sure I noticed and told Erick when he used that strategy, even if at first he could only stick with it for a short time.

Be ready for setbacks
There were plenty of setbacks. For instance, I'd be watching Erick talk out a problem with a friend on the playground, and just as I was about to pat myself on the back, he'd get impatient and shove. As I headed over to intervene, I'd imagine what my co-workers were thinking as I knelt down to talk with Erick once again. Were they thinking he should be punished instead of having another quiet chat with me? Teaching Erick problem-solving strategies was working so slowly. Was this the best strategy?

When I had these moments of self-doubt, I got myself back on track by thinking: *How can I respond in a way that will help him keep learning?* When I thought about it that way, it was obvious that I needed to stay the course. Even in this incident, Erick was showing progress. A few months before he would not have even attempted to problem-solve with his friend. Now he had vocabulary and problem-solving skills and he had tried to use them. He was learning.

Remember that learning new things takes time
I frequently reminded myself that Erick was learning a way of solving problems that was new for him. The old way was deeply ingrained, and it made sense that it would take time and practice to replace those old habits. Over time, I watched Erick's self-confidence grow as he learned that he could control his behavior. For children like Erick, whose lives outside of school are fairly chaotic, building awareness of the control they do have—over their behavior, their learning, and their life—is a key step in building their self-worth.

At the end of the year Erick moved on to another teacher who used *Responsive Classroom* strategies. I told her what a sweet boy he was, and I told her about the behavior management strategies he'd been learning. At that point, Erick still had a long way to go—but by the end of second grade his self-control was much improved. He acted thoughtfully most of the time, and when he made mistakes he took responsibility and tried to make amends. He still took care of his classmates and cared about their feelings. He still loved school.

Now Erick is in middle school, and each day I see him when he comes to the elementary school to pick up his younger sister. Every day he asks how her day was, and, if she had trouble, he talks with her about how to do better next time. He's still a sweet boy, and he still has a rough life outside of school, but there he is, giving her what he needed when he was her age! I still keep the ceramic swan Erick gave me years ago on my desk. It reminds me of all I learned from teaching him.

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