Managing Difficult Behaviour in Schools

A practical guide by Tom Bennett

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I've been a behaviour consultant, trainer and mentor for six years, and a teacher for almost twice that. I've been to over 100 schools, coaching, mentoring and training staff in basic behaviour techniques. I'm also the TES behaviour advisor, and I run the behaviour forum online. During my career, I've learned a few simple truths that deserve to be said a few times:

- Everyone experiences difficult behaviour at school.
- Children, like all people, can be selfish, cruel, kind and amazing.
- It isn't your fault if they misbehave, but it is your responsibility to act if they do.
- Most students will be happy to abide by rules that are fair, consistent and proportionate.
- Almost all students prefer to be in a school where the adults take behaviour seriously.

In this guide you'll find some of what I think are the most basic things you need to be doing in order to get the behaviour you need, and children need, in order for everyone to do well. There's a lot more to it than this, but this is the heart of the matter.

Good luck.

Tom Bennett
Behaviour consultant

UNISON represents around 250,000 school support staff across the UK, in every role including teaching assistants, technicians, caretakers, business managers and admin and finance staff, learning support, cooks and cleaners. Every one of these staff has some contact with pupils – even if they're not based in the classroom.

Managing challenging and difficult behaviours is one of the main areas that our members raise as a cause for concern. Unfortunately, school support staff are often overlooked when behaviour management strategies or training programmes are designed and it is too often assumed that only teachers need support or training on behaviour management.

UNISON has commissioned this guidance to give support staff more confidence and practical help when dealing with challenging behaviour. Tom's light-hearted style makes this serious subject easier to engage with. It should start you on the road to believing you can tackle difficult situations that previously seemed insurmountable.

Jon Richards
UNISON head of education

THE TOP 10 BEHAVIOUR TIPS

Behaviour management is both simple and hard: surprisingly simple in its basic application, heart-breakingly slow in execution. Here are the 10 things that everyone who works with children should do, in order to have the best chance of getting the behaviour you both need:

1. Understand the school behaviour policy

Every good school should have a behaviour policy. It should also have a clear line management structure that allows staff to work together on behavioural concerns. If the school doesn't have either, then you should be very concerned (and should raise this with your UNISON rep). Know both the policy and the line management structure and make sure you use them as much as possible. Knowing the school policy will help you understand the support to which you're entitled. It will also help give you confidence to ask for the help you need.

2. Calmly explain what you need students to do, using non-aggressive, neutral language and tone

Before you attempt to 'manage' the behaviour of students, first, try asking. It may be all that is needed.

3. Repeat the instruction more firmly, but still calmly

This gives them take-up time to respond. It also lets them know you are prepared to insist on what you want them to do.

4. Repeat the instruction once more, reminding them that they are at risk of breaking a school rule, which will have consequences for them

By this point you need to show them that you're looking for behaviour that the whole school expects, and that they are at risk of receiving a sanction. Encourage them to do the right thing at this point. Let them know that you won't back down while at the same time showing them that you hope they can choose wisely.

5. Summon help/ record the incident/ escalate

If by this point the student still isn't following a reasonable instruction, it's time to enlist the school. If you have the authority to do so, set a sanction. A detention is usually a simple way to remind them of their responsibilities, plus a call home. If you don't have the authority to sanction, then you need to go to a line manager or other member of staff responsible for behaviour (see page 6). Whatever else, do not ignore it, or the student will learn they can do as they please with you.

6. Take away the audience

Young people will act very differently alone than when with their friends. If you have anything serious to say – especially if it involves them losing face – take them aside.

7. Know their names

This is essential and good manners. If you don't know their names, then any kind of control becomes nearly impossible. If you need to, find someone who does know them. In the long run it's worth it.

8. Follow up

If at first you don't succeed, keep it up. You may work in a role that doesn't have sanction powers. Fine: ask for the assistance of someone who does. If students try to avoid your first sanction, then escalate, and involve other parties higher up the food chain. And follow up with them the next day, for example.

9. Don't walk alone

You can't do it all by yourself: you exist in a structure, a hierarchy of adults and authority that can all be wielded for your purposes. Line management, SLT, heads of year, department heads, mentors and teachers can all be brought to your disposal. Badly behaved students are almost without exception badly organised and work alone. If you work with others you have the strength of 10.

10. Don't freak out

It sounds obvious, but this is a common error. If you're not getting the behaviour you need, then it's very tempting to blow your nut and scream your head off. Never, never do this – it's so easy for the kids to put their feet up and think, 'Oh boy, this is like watching TV'. Besides, many children get treated worse at home. Additionally, it's a totally disproportionate response to most behaviours and it makes you look weak. As The Little Book of Calm says, be the king of your own calm kingdom.

"No man is an island", wrote 17th century poet John Donne. And we all need the support of others. None of us has magical powers, Hogwarts' staff excepting, and none of us has the power to persuade large groups to follow our whims. Our authority stems from a number of things, and one of them is being part of a greater body – the school. As representatives of the school, we wield abilities far beyond the limits of the children we look after. If we work together and present a united front, then the kids, who by themselves are usually fairly disorganised and focused on the short term, usually defer, eventually, to the pressure from a consistent and united adult presence.

You and the school

You are not alone. You work as part of a team and a community. If you exclude these people from your working practices, you reduce yourself to an army of one, and good luck with that. If your school has good structures, there are allies all around you. Ignore their assistance at your peril. And they need you too. The roles vary from school to school, but the archetypes should be fairly apparent in most institutions:

Form tutor

Often the main pastoral link between child, home and school. In some schools the form tutor plays a major pastoral role; in others, they barely take registers. Find out what they can offer you if you need advice, a call home, a detention set, or a reward given.

Head of year/ head of house/ head of learning

This role also varies, but normally it exists as a pastoral link that supports learning and social development. They are often the most useful people with whom to liaise because they track the pupil's pastoral progress across the terms and years.

Senior management

Normally they exist at one level removed from most on-the-ground staff. However, there will be times when situations will demand that contact be made immediately with the kings and queens of the school chessboard, serious fighting or abuse allegations, for example. If in doubt, ask your…

Line manager

In schools where behaviour in discrete lessons is dealt with by subject teachers, escalation of incidents or repeated infractions of rules usually involve the line manager, often the head of department. Some schools save these roles for sanctions that involve trivial infractions, such as missed homework, or forgotten equipment. Other schools use heads of department as the first escalation point for all behaviour problems.

Mentors/ buddies

Some schools have pupils (particularly those struggling with school) paired off with supportive pupils from other classes or year groups. Other schools will have adult mentors employed to look after specific pupils.

Teaching assistants and the SENCO

If you are not a teaching assistant then it's worth talking to an experienced one as they are often an invaluable resource when it comes to specific behaviour advice. Also, the SENCO particularly can offer huge levels of background information, similar to a head of year or head of learning.

Parents

Parents are not antagonists. In most situations, properly approached, they are a gold mine of support, so never feel as if they are, by default, part of the problem. They can be the solution – you'll never know until you approach them.

Other pupils

Delicate, but powerful. Do you know any pupils you trust? Any mature students who you think might be able to give you input? There's no shame in asking, IF you treat this delicately.

The head

Relationships may vary from school to school; some heads like to stroll through classrooms like a behaviour hoover. Others lock themselves away, and woe betide the staff member who interrupts them.

Colleagues

There is a wealth of experience in the school; use the staffroom like an enormous, coffee stained version of the internet. Don't be shy of looking for help.

If the school is organised, and if you ask for help, you are not alone.

Troubleshooting relationships

One of the most common complaints I hear is from staff who have tried to use the school system and found it fell short of ideal; who did as they were told and used school sanctions, and needed to escalate them, and found that… nothing happened. This is worse than cowardly. Schools work – they only work – when the adults involved in the hierarchy work to the same ends and support each other. I don't have to draw a table to describe what would happen were I to remove a leg.

What do you do if you find that support isn't supporting you?

Do something

It's easy to shrug your shoulders and forget about it, and unsurprisingly many people don't feel comfortable with raising problems with line management. But raise them you must. You can be perfectly civil and raise the point in a neutral, unchallenging way. A manager may have forgotten to pick up a kid after you asked them to, for example. So allow them the courtesy of understanding that they may have been very busy, or were simply human and forgot and ask, 'I know you couldn't make it then, do you know when you might be able to do it?' Nice and neutral, no barracking or blame. Just 'What can we do to fix things?'

Face-to-face is usually better than email

Emails are swift, but infinitely ignorable. Recipients can claim that they never received it, or they may be too swamped to reply. So find the person you need to see, and talk to them face-to-face. Then get them to commit to a specific action by a specific time. Write it down, and make a good deal of theatre about this act, letting them know that you've recorded the promise. If the deadline for the promised intervention flies past you with a whooshing sound, then return to them and say, 'So what are we doing now?'. Still, sweetness and light, but with a serious look on your face. Let them know that you won't be fobbed off, or ignored.

Escalate

If all else fails, then go one up on the ladder and find someone who can help. Of course, don't just barge up the ladder without letting the relevant person know that you'll be doing it. This is even more delicate, but I find that saying, 'Oh, I can see you're busy… perhaps Mr X can assist me instead?' gets results. Most people don't want their bosses to know they haven't delivered, so it's a good tactic. CC'ing them into email communications also makes the point that your conversation has happened and needs action.

It isn't easy to manage upwards, but support from senior staff and middle leaders isn't a privilege – it's your right, and sometimes you need to be the one who makes it happen.

What to do if the school system isn't working for you

One of the most common reasons for staff unhappiness with behaviour is when they don't feel supported by the school structures. This might be because they don't know how to access the school support, or sadly, some times because the school structures (or people maintaining those structures) are weak or only intermittently effective.

There are often, I have noticed, two schools within every school. In one school are senior or experienced staff; long-termers and full-timers who know the kids, the systems, and have spent years building up relationships. They might have lighter timetables, status, and time to follow up behaviour incidents. In the other school, separated only by half a degree of reality, are 'new' staff. They usually enjoy the highest directed workloads, don't know the kids so well, and have a procession of names and faces to deal with. Two schools, one school.

For schools to make meaningful behaviour systems work, both schools need to talk to each other. I always invite school leaders to cast their minds back to when they were themselves new teachers, and to consider the very different perspective that this lends them. Empathy is a valuable commodity, never more so than in a leader. Anyone in a leadership position in any school needs to be comfortable answering this question: could I handle that class? If the answer is genuinely yes, then you are capable of advising the staff member. If no, then you must be honest with yourself and refer behaviour issues to those that can.

Great behaviour happens when schools operate consistent policies that are clear, universal and applied rigorously; when all staff and all students know what to expect and when sanctions are so certain and infallible that they practically extinguish themselves because no one incurs them. This is possible, in every school, if the will, the leadership and the heart is there. That means all staff. And of course, that kind of heart is led by the head.

Defusing difficult situations

It's to be hoped that you'll never encounter a dangerous situation, or one that places you at personal or emotional risk. But a sad reality of working in any environment where you deal with the public is the accompanying risk of unusually difficult or even dangerous situations. Fights, threats, verbal abuse are fortunately uncommon for the majority of school workers, but still too common for many. How can these situations be dealt with best?

1. Keep as calm as possible. Easy advice that's sometimes hard to take, but still valuable to remember. When others around you are losing their heads, if you keep yours, you have an advantage. Before committing to an action, consider if you have an option. And try to appear calm; aggression, violent action, loud voices, open tempers, are all often fuel to the flame of an emotionally fraught situation.

2. Speak assertively, without aggression or submission. Talk as if you expect to be listened to rather than as if you demand to be heard. Speak slowly, and just slightly above conversational level, unless the situation demands a blunt response (for example, if breaking up a fight, a shouted 'Stop that!' will often defuse a situation where a spoken command will not. But if you are going to shout, try to not direct it at one person, or you may find their aggression is redirected towards you.

3. Summon help as soon as possible. Do this with almost no delay, unless there is an emergency that you need to deal with. You work as part of a team, and when danger is present, this is never more important.

4. Only get physically involved if you feel safe to do so, or there is a pressing reason to do so. There is no requirement for most staff to physically intervene, or place themselves in prescribed danger (unless their contract specifically requires it, such as a guard), although you may feel that some situations require it. Breaking up fights physically can be extremely dangerous, but if you feel comfortable with the level of risk, and there is an obvious gain to be made (for example the well-being of a child)

5. Use reason when you can, and remove the audience. Talking away a problem is usually the best option. At all costs, try to get the protagonists away from their peers, and preferably separate. Ten minutes is a long time in such matters, and emotions that were boiling before can cool quickly. After this period, sense is often much more likely to prevail.

6. Never respond to a threat of any kind with a similar response. At all times remember your position as a member of staff and try to maintain a sense of composure and dignity. If you offer brittle sarcasm to a student who is deliberately rude, it doesn't make you look cool, it simply makes you look like a student. You don't need to win arguments. Walk away, warn the student, and then follow up with appropriate members of staff.

7. Never keep it to yourself. Always report any incident, and expect a response. And if you don't get one, press the matter.

One of the best ways to get pupils to listen to what you need from them is to consider how you speak, and how you act. Undeniably, we all know some people who convey gravitas and command, and others who sound like they're begging for money. How can you build up your communication muscles and sound more like the former?

Improve your communicating style

Listen to yourself

When you speak to others, what kind of voice are you using? Are you proud, confident, authoritative, wheedling, or bossy? You'll probably sound different in different situations. What does this tell you about how you speak to the children? Do you treat them as nuisances, servants, problems or… children? Record yourself. It's awful to listen to, but do it.

Perspective

Finding the grace to endure what you cannot change, and the ability to have a sense of humour about trivial things will go a long way to keeping you sane.

Speak without fear

Interestingly, when we speak to people in situations where we don't worry that they'll refuse us, we often speak in calm, moderate tones of cool, assumed expectation. For example, in a greengrocer's. Yet when we want something in a school, we often fall prey to shouting, begging, snarling or being sarcastic. Command sounds calm. That's what you should aim for in the school too. Sound as if you expect to be followed and often people will follow you.

Talking to parents

Too many people in schools view parents as inconveniences, as if they were somehow a problem to be resolved. To be fair, if you're dealing with a particularly difficult student, it's an easy miscalculation to make. But that's a dangerous avenue to take; sure, some parents need to have a word with themselves, but so does everyone sometimes. The vast majority of parents want exactly what you want – the educational well-being of the child. You may differ in the details, but you share common ground. So here are three things to think about when it comes to home calls or meetings.

Parents can be part of the solution, not the problem

Some staff speak to parents as if they owed them money. 'Your child has been disgusting!' they thunder over the phone. The parent instantly clenches in defensive irritation, battle lines are drawn and all of a sudden it's personal. Talk to adults like human beings, and they'll probably do the same to you. Start with 'Little Beyonce is normally excellent, but she's let herself down and I need your help to get her back on track' etc.

For better, for worse

Some parents only hear from the school when their little dumpling has been caught with fireworks and tobacco in their pencil case. How often do we contact home to say that things are going well, or have improved, or even something brilliant has happened – an exceptional piece of homework, a target met, a good deed performed? I know that we don't have much by way of spare time but I guarantee that if you phone home in the good times, when it comes to the bad times, you'll have an emotional bank account ready.

Talk to them before you need them

This is connected to the previous point. If you think you'll ever need to call home, then take some time to introduce yourself to some of the families. These children don't spring from nothingness; they have an origin, a history and a family. Talk to the families; ask them if you need to know anything special about the student that will help you deal with them. This might be on the school gates as the pupils enter, or filling out forms on open evenings, or as they wait in the reception to collect children. But use the time to build bridges you don't need yet.

Handling personal questions

Children are naturally curious – it must be in their job description. And we all seem to be fascinated by other people's personal lives. But just because other people's lives are interesting doesn't give anyone else the automatic right of access to the details of those lives. And students are no different: you stroll into their view; your job might even involve them actively viewing you, paying you attention. No wonder, then, if they speculate about you. Every staff member will get this at some point: 'Miss, what's your name? No…your first name…? Do you have a boyfriend?' etc. So what do you do?

You have the right to reveal as little as you wish

Your role in the school is defined by contract. There is no legal or moral requirement upon you to reveal an eyelash more than you choose to the children. Your relationship with the children is first and foremost a professional one, and you must never, never feel under pressure to tell them anything that you don't want to. Many staff struggle to respond to personal comments, because they, understandably don't wish to appear rude, when the student might very well simply be making a friendly overture. It's better to say, in a polite and assertive tone, something that deflects their interest in a neutral way:

'Where should you be right now?'

'No personal questions, please.'

'I know you aren't being rude, but I don't answer questions about matters like that. I'm sure you understand.'

Don't be bullied

Unfortunately, many children will use the 'personal question' approach as a tacit form of bullying. 'Do you have a boyfriend? Do you have a girlfriend? Are you gay?' etc. isn't just nosiness; it's a power struggle, as the student tries to show that they can control you in front of their peers. If you asked a pupil, 'Why do you smell funny?' you'd be in the head's office as soon as someone could get to Facebook. Just because it's 'only a question' doesn't mean it isn't an attempt to bully you. So, if you rebuke them for it, and they say something like, 'I was only asking!' then you can treat it as if they had performed a more direct form of criticism or insult towards you. In other words, treat it as a serious piece of misbehaviour, especially if it's directed towards you. Use your normal sanction procedures.

Read your audience

Of course, this advice is simply best practice for any staff member new to a group of students. As your relationship with them in your role proceeds, you may well develop (one hopes) greater levels of trust and self-restraint. If you know the students well (and I stress that this is an *if*) then you may feel that you can reveal a little more as time progresses. This is entirely your call. Bear in mind that once the genie is out the bottle you cannot put it back in. If you reveal your partner's name, or where you come from, then be prepared for someone to mention it, further down the line; be prepared for people you haven't spoken to, to mention it. Could you handle someone shouting it across a playground? If the answer is 'yes' then feel free. But if not, tread softly. Once you have confidence in your role, many such questions seem trivial and unthreatening.

Dealing with 'He said, she said'

If a pupil comes up to you and claims that little Jimmy clobbered her with a pencil case or something, then you have an instant dilemma: did he really, or is he being framed? Unlike Cluedo, it's hard to call the bluff. So one tactic (if the allegations aren't being made frequently) is to take both aside and get both sides of the story, written if they're old enough. It needs to happen quickly, though, before stories get constructed. You can also get witnesses to do the same, and in the manner of sleuths everywhere, see if any inconsistencies arise.

Problem is, this takes an enormous chunk of time out of your life; and the kids will learn it. This means that any time they want to occupy you, they might hatch a little plan to create a diversion. So if possible, deflect the deflection; tell them that you'll see them both after school so that they can write out their stories, or at least describe them at length. If they're doing it for fun, they'll hate this, and never do it again.

The old fashioned approach is, of course, to try to keep your vision as global as possible so you never miss a trick. Always stand in such a way that you have the best eye-line possible for the students in your area.

Most people are aware these days that the way we communicate is at least as important as the content of our communication. A different pitch, a different facial expression, a tone, a register, can all turn what you're saying into the complete opposite.

The way we speak to students is enormously important. You only have to see the difference in reactions students have to different members of staff to see how true this is – and it's not all about status and relationships. In the 1970s it became fashionable to talk about body language. While it's a much-misunderstood area, there are many things that we need to remember when we talk to people, especially in moments of stress, crisis or tension between two parties, as in a situation of behaviour control, for example.

Things to remember when addressing a pupil

Tone and register

The temptation, when addressing a student misbehaving, is to ramp up the gears to Def-Con 1, bringing the big guns out immediately. At the other extreme is the temptation to try to be jolly and jokey. Neither of these is ideal. Say what you want to happen exactly as you want it to happen. Be straightforward, direct and clear. Now is not the time to attempt sarcasm or wit, unless the situation is only mildly disruptive, in which case it can serve as a salve, or a distraction, dissolving the tension. Anything else needs the direct approach. Keep your voice even and low, and try not to scream, unless you absolutely need the volume to cut through background noise and the scenario is a dangerous one. Don't wheedle, don't bark. Say what you mean loudly and clearly.

Repetition is your friend

If you issue a direction to a pupil, and they want to make something of it, the worst thing to do is to get sidetracked by their questions. If your instruction is reasonable – and of course it is, right? – then you don't need to explain yourself or start a debate. Just say what you want, and if you have to, say it again. And then again, showing that you are totally focused on what needs to happen, rather than what they want to happen. Bat diversions back to the main topic. 'No, Sam, you need to take your hat off… hat, Sam… that hat still needs to come off… we can talk about it later, but right now the hat needs to come off.'

Eye contact

Never be afraid to look right into their eyes as you talk to them. Once you have delivered your message, wait a heartbeat, and then look away, indicating that you look where you want, when you want. It's a powerful subliminal signal of assertiveness without indicating submissiveness or aggressiveness. And never get into a staring match with them.

Say as little as possible, if that.

Serious talk means be serious

If you need to tell a student off for misbehaviour, or if you're advising them of the possible consequences of misbehaviour, then there's no point delivering the message in a way that suggests that you're terribly sorry about it all, and gosh isn't the world an awful place that we have to say such things? This erodes the perceived sincerity of your belief in what you say. Keep your tone even and stern.

Anger breeds hatred

There is a legitimate place for genuine anger in life. But it is very rarely a useful commodity in your educational communications. It indicates that passion has seized you, and usually indicates to others that you are to some extent not in control of yourself. This might be fine if you're trying to face down a potential antagonist in a street fight and avoid actual conflict, but what does it convey to a child? Some will feel fear, of course, but is that what you're trying to achieve? Others will respond in kind, and you'll find that you've escalated the confrontation needlessly. Worse, some will laugh in your face. And where will you go then? Either you raise the stakes higher or back down, which makes you look stupid. Even if you feel angry, try to keep a lid on it, and never speak as though you're furious.

Speak softly and carry a big stick

If you always do what you say you will, then you will almost never need to blow your stack, shout loudly, or repeat yourself. Children learn quickly which members of staff follow up on their pronouncements, and which ones are full of hot air. A staff member who shouts a lot but never calls home, sets detentions, reports students etc. isn't seen as strict, they just come across as useless. Not a good look. To quote behaviour expert Bill Rogers: 'The severity of the sanction is less important than the certainty of the sanction.'. This is especially true because our sanctions aren't particularly severe anyway. So what we have left is certainty. Let the children know that you mean what you say and your communication will stand as tall as a tower.

Things to avoid when addressing a pupil

It's always best to avoid speaking to pupils like…

You're hilarious

Even if you are a riot at the staff party, don't assume that your sense of humour will have pupils in stitches. Teenagers especially have an almost mutant superpower to resist the cultural cues and comedy of the generation prior to them, and for many it is an act of conscious rebellion to disagree with your sense of humour.

You're their best mate

It isn't uncommon for staff to be filled to the brim with love and enthusiasm for their new charges; they imagine that all the students need is to know that you really, really care about them, and then they'll line up with glee for you. Alas, this is a cannon that backfires. As you get to know them (and vice versa) you can ease off, and cut them slack in areas where they've earned it. Until then: a fairly serious face.

You're furious

Some staff members feel that bellowing at a kid will somehow make them behave. Perhaps it will if they believe you might belt them, or they're normally biddable. But this tactic has diminishing returns. Screaming your top off raises the stakes in a tense situation, and besides, it shows them that they've gotten under your skin. By all means do so if you want them to put their feet up and watch a show. But it's cruel.

With sarcasm

This is a minefield. Sarcasm is perfectly possible, even in an educational context, when you know the kids well and when they trust that you want the best for them. After all, sarcasm is usually a double entendre designed to deliberately patronise the recipient. Needless to say, that's toxic to someone with whom you don't have a strong relationship, don't have authority over and don't know well. Every time I hear a staff member trying to come up with a comeback to an unsubtle adolescent barb, I think to myself 'just don't do it'.

In conclusion

Pupils will test your patience beyond your wildest expectations. They will also surprise and amaze you at times. Whatever your role is in school, remember that you have every right to be treated with dignity and pupils have every right to be treated with dignity. We all have the right to work and learn in a safe, ordered environment based on civility, respect and shared interests and values. Once you realise that, you have everything you need to begin.

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Everyone who works in a school will have to deal with difficult or challenging behaviour from students at some point. But students generally respond well to consistent and fair rules and standards.

UNISON repeatedly hears from school support staff that managing behaviour is a cause of stress and concern and that support staff are often overlooked when it comes to training.

This guide has been commissioned by UNISON and written by behaviour consultant Tom Bennett. It takes a light-touch, practical approach that will help you to become more confident in dealing with difficult behaviour and applying good behaviour standards in your school.

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