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# DEALING WITH DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

CHALLENGE

1

## Defining the Problem and Finding Solutions

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All teachers expect to encounter some student disruptions in their classrooms, such as calling out without permission, making noises, or chatting with peers. However, newer teachers are often surprised by the sheer volume of disruptions they must deal with on a daily basis and how a relatively minor issue suddenly can become a major problem. A recent survey of teachers across 30 countries indicated that only an average of 78% of allocated teaching time is devoted to teaching; much of the remaining time is spent trying to maintain order in the classroom (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2019). In the United Kingdom, a government report estimated that some students were losing up to an hour of instruction per day—a loss of 38 days of instruction per school year—due to disruptive behavior (Office for Standards of Education, 2014).

Without effective strategies to address persistent disruptions, students and their teachers are at risk. Disruptive students spend less time engaged with academic tasks and often have fewer positive relationships with peers and teachers (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Further, these students may negatively affect learning environments by distracting peers and requiring teachers to allocate precious teaching time to dealing with problem behavior (Guerra & Smith, 2006; Office for Standards of Education, 2014). Disruptive classroom behavior also is associated with greater teacher stress and burnout (Abel & Sewell, 1999), and the inability to effectively manage these behaviors, or managing them in a way that doesn't meet their needs, can lead to over-referring children for special education assessment and disparate outcomes for discipline policies and practices (White et al., 2024).

Whether teachers have a few or many disruptive behaviors in their classrooms, strategies for effectively dealing with these problems is essential. Given that disruptions might occur for a range of reasons (e.g., the student likes the attention, the student is bored, the student has difficulty sustaining attention for long periods of time), having a range of strategies can help teachers feel better equipped to manage these behaviors in ways that suit both them and their students. Let's jump into a few scenarios that may feel familiar. Don't worry—we'll follow them up immediately with some potential solutions!

## Disruptive Behavior: Scenario 1

It's math class, and you ask the class a question related to fractions. Oscar, your likable, helpful, extremely tiring, and verbal student, yells out "an elephant's butt" as his answer. As per usual, his peers laugh, and Oscar grins. Oscar loves to make people laugh and spends much of his time making comments or noises that he hopes others will find funny. You and the other teachers even agree that Oscar is quite witty and often says things that are genuinely humorous, but his nearly constant antics make teaching difficult. You don't know what to do because when you remind Oscar of the classroom rules or tell him that he is disturbing others, it only seems to make the problem worse. Telling other students not to laugh or to ignore Oscar also does not work because many of the students find his behavior entertaining. What's additionally frustrating is that Oscar typically gets his work done in class to a good standard, completing unfinished work during breaks or as homework when his joking around takes up class time. Unfortunately, not all of his peers are able to finish their work and are distracted by Oscar's antics. Although Oscar is well liked by teachers and peers, both are beginning to get annoyed with his disruptive behavior. What can you do?

### **Scenario 1 Solution: Give Him Attention!**

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It is clear that Oscar likes attention from both adults and peers. It also seems reasonable to assume that Oscar has learned that being funny is a good way to get that attention. Given that Oscar does not seem to have difficulty completing his work, it is unlikely that his behaviors are aimed at avoiding tasks that might be too easy or too difficult. When he does not finish his work, it is typically because he has spent his time doing other things.

It makes sense that giving Oscar attention when he is disruptive (e.g., reminding him of rules, other children laughing) makes the problem worse. We know that Oscar likes attention, so if disruptions lead to attention, then he is more likely to keep doing those behaviors. Controlling the reactions of peers (e.g., telling them not to laugh) is a losing battle for any teacher. Teachers who try these strategies often find they begin punishing students who were not initially responsible for the problem, for instance, by scolding children who laugh when another child does something that they find funny.

Although Oscar has learned how to get attention by being disruptive, he also has other skills that could potentially result in the same outcome. Teachers naturally focus their attention on problem behavior more than appropriate behavior because problem behaviors often *require* a response, whereas appropriate behaviors do not. However, if they can shift their focus, they might find they have fewer problem behaviors that require their attention.

For students like Oscar, the key is to find another behavior that will lead to the same outcome as his disruptions. Given that Oscar is competent with academics, allowing him to support a less academically competent peer might give him the peer attention he craves. When he is working well alongside his peer, you could offer praise, thus giving Oscar the adult attention he is seeking. Even when Oscar is not supporting a peer, you should be proactive about looking for opportunities to praise appropriate behavior. Setting a timer or using a Motivaider® can be helpful in reminding busy teachers to look for good behavior. It is important that these devices be set to short intervals (e.g., 4–5 minutes) initially because waiting too long to praise good behavior will inevitably lead to the student engaging in problem behavior.

You might also try allowing Oscar to make people laugh in a more appropriate context. For instance, you might set a rule whereby Oscar can tell a joke to the class if he finishes his work and does not disrupt the lesson. Again, timing is everything. Oscar should be allowed to tell his joke as soon as the lesson has ended, provided he followed the rule; if he has to wait too long, he may try disruptive behavior instead.

These strategies are referred to as *differential reinforcement* (Flood et al., 2002). They come from an area of psychology called applied behavior analysis (ABA). You can read more about these strategies in Chapter 3.

## Disruptive Behavior: Scenario 2

José seems as though he is being run by a motor, and it is driving you crazy. He is constantly on the move, whether it be getting up dozens of times during a lesson to locate materials, checking in with peers to see what they are doing, or incessantly tapping his pencil on the desk. José likes to learn but cannot seem to be still even during lessons that he enjoys. If a thought pops into José's head, it seems to immediately come out of his mouth. He has difficulty waiting his turn to speak and gets frustrated if he is not immediately called on during group discussions. His academic skills are good, although he is a bit below average for his age in reading.

The great thing about José is that he is constantly enthusiastic and eager to learn. He has a few good friends, but many of his peers are weary of his disruptive behavior and are beginning to comment negatively about him disturbing them when they are trying to work. You've tried using a sticker chart to reward staying in his space and completing his work, but José lost interest in the chart after a day. You've also tried letting him work in the hallway (ostensibly to reduce the number of distractions in class) but found that he often wandered away instead of doing his work. What can you do?

### Scenario 2 Solution: Let Him Move!

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Behavior always occurs for a reason. You can consider it a method of communication. Students might do particular things to get what they want or to escape from something they don't want, or it can be a combination of the two. However, behavior can also be related to our biological needs, including sensory ones. For José, it is possible that he feels a need to move around because doing so helps him regulate himself. Trying to make him stay in one space likely makes him feel a bit unbalanced, and even if you could make him stay, sitting is not the same as learning. José will need opportunities to move in ways that help him focus more on his academic tasks but not cause a distraction for his peers.

One potential solution is a bicycle chair, which does not make much noise but allows José to be physically active while he works. Activities that activate the vestibular system also can be helpful. Our vestibular systems give our bodies information about where we are in space, where our heads are, and whether we are moving. It helps us balance and lets us know when we aren't. Moving your head or accelerating your body activates the vestibular system. From that perspective, running around the classroom could work

quite well for José, but it is difficult to do work when you're running, not to mention the disruptions to José's peers!

A more reasonable option that could achieve the same outcome is having a mini-trampoline in the classroom. You could give José small trampoline breaks every lesson, which would activate his vestibular system and make him feel more balanced and regulated. In the beginning, you would probably need to organize the breaks, paying particular attention to how frequently José seems to become restless. After a while, you should be able to allow José to choose when he needs a break, within reason. For instance, you might allow him to have 5 minutes of trampoline time during each lesson. It is likely that other students in the class also will want a turn on the trampoline regardless of their sensory needs. You can simply work out a schedule whereby everyone gets some trampoline time each week, allocating more time for the students who need it the most, like José. You can read more about strategies for students like José in Chapter 1.

### Disruptive Behavior: Scenario 3

You know that research supports students working in small groups, and it is clear that many of your own students are eager to do so. In fact, when you do whole-group instruction, many appear bored—no matter how engaging you try to make the instruction! But when you allow them to work in small groups, it feels like you've lost control of the lesson. Isak, Kiernan, Linda, and Kenneth immediately jump to work together; as your extroverts, this group can be boisterous and disruptive, even when they are getting their work done. Sometimes you'll even catch a few of your students moving their chairs to work together when you haven't given direct instruction to work in pairs or groups, and their cute response is, "What's wrong? We're just collaborating!" All of this "collaborating" sounds good in theory, but it is resulting in students moving desks, talking, and generally disrupting your nice, quiet classroom.

### Scenario 3 Solution: Use Station Teaching!

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Station Teaching is an approach to co-teaching that will be described in full in Chapter 5. Station Teaching involves having small groups of students rotate through multiple activities. Students can choose their own groups, you can choose the groups, or you can use a combination of both strategies. Chapter 5, p. 134, provides a strategy for creating groups that incorporate student

preferences but also allows the teacher to select groups. Each station should offer activities that engage learners and instruct them on the objective of the day. For example, in a reading class, one station might be a reading passage that asks comprehension questions, another might be a video teaching about metaphors and similes, a third might ask students to highlight nouns and verbs on a page in different colors, and a fourth might be a direct instruction lesson on figurative language by you or another teacher.

As noted in the Scenario 3, research supports the use of small-group instruction and shows that it facilitates smaller student-teacher ratios, encourages the use of differentiation techniques, and increases cognitive engagement of learners (Karten & Murawski, 2020; Lochner et al., 2019). However, simply creating small groups is insufficient and can lead to chaos, like in Scenario 3! When Station Teaching, you and your co-teachers can work collaboratively to create small-group instruction that maximizes student engagement but also is mindful of managing behavior. Be sure to review the classroom rules for noise and transitions while also reminding students which types of collaboration and interaction are appropriate and which are not. You can also provide collaborative roles (described in more detail in Chapter 7 on cooperative learning) to minimize one or two students taking charge and doing the work for their peers.

In addition to teaching students how stations work and the rules for engaging collaboratively, you and your co-teacher also need to proactively identify the work for each station. Although some stations can be led by a teacher or paraprofessional, and thereby manage behavior directly, others will need to facilitate students working independently. These might involve students watching an instructional video, working on independent materials, or even playing a collaborative instructional game together. In all cases, you will need to build in accountability for each station so that students are motivated to stay on task and complete quality work. Accountability measures, such as completing a Google Doc or other form to turn in after each station, can be helpful to manage behavior and are also excellent examples of formative assessments (read more about that in Chapter 2). Once you and your co-teacher have identified stations and groups, selected the materials needed, and instructed students on roles and accountability requirements, they are ready to go! Now students can work collaboratively, while the adults in the room help manage behavior, teach small groups, and avoid any more headaches.