How parents and teachers can help young people with challenging behaviour

Recent research into inclusive education in England and Wales has suggested that, whilst schools are supportive of the idea in general, they are struggling to deal with the inclusion of pupils exhibiting challenging behaviour. As a behaviour support teacher, or parent and trainer I have had first-hand experience of the difficulties that arise in today’s busy classrooms. Staff at all levels of experience are frequently having to contend with disruptive and sometimes abusive pupil behaviour - from constant chatting to physical menace.

These problems have coursed much media attention, creating an image of Britain’s schools. They have also made ironing the ‘blame’ that lies at the feet of some parents - particularly those engaged in drug-taking - far more difficult. A growing number of families feel they are not receiving the support they need and are resentful of the difficulties created by the presence of a child. As a result, it is difficult to argue the case for any form of intervention. The reality is that there are no easy answers.

Unpredictable situations may also make it very hard to make sensible changes, of course, it is all too tempting to overlook the possibilities of what to expect, and what is expected of them, wherever possible. Teachers can do a great deal to make it easier for their students to learn, and to help them to succeed.

Debunk the myth

I am keen to help debunk the myth that behaviour management is something of a gift bestowed on a lucky few, that it is all about manmanagement, power and innate cleverness. Successful practice can be shown to actually very simple, even formulaic. Many helpful behaviour management strategies are as easy to use as breathing. They can be taught in any classroom, with any group of children. Parents can also be helped to clear the way to effective learning.

The key things I emphasise are:

- Calmness (avoid shouting, aggression or confrontation)
- Anticipation (allow them the chance to explain or put things right, give warnings before escalating consequences)
- Fineness (speak assertively, be direct, use commands instead of questions, thank you instead of ‘please’)
- Positivity (give praise where possible, use reinforcing praise systems, notice improvements)
- Consistency (whole school approaches, main behaviour strategies, involving parents, following routines)

If we practice in this way, we are creating a stable, predictable environment within which a young person can feel safe. In my experience, pupils with behavioural difficulties may find it difficult to cope when they have boundaries and structures changed or removed. This can cause anxiety, restlessness and result in disruptive outbursts (for example, break and lunch times have always been notoriously problematic for these individuals).

Multi-agency team

Any attempt to improve standards of behaviour, of course, takes time, space and expertise - luxuries that many schools may not possess. I am keen to advocate this collaborative, systematic approach. Changing behaviour is not a task that can be taken on by one single group or establishment - it requires a team effort from all areas of the school.

Nevertheless, I am keen to stress that often good practice is in having one force, one group of people in authority, that young people today have a lot to contend with, that they will not necessarily benefit from being constantly isolated, blamed and labelled for their difficulties. It is important that teachers be in a position to shape positive results.

Most of the challenging young people that I encounter are learning with difficulty, and the patterns of their lives can be extremely chaotic. All too often, I find myself in confrontation situations such as instability in the home, insufficient nurturing, neglect, abuse, poverty, alcohol and ignoring. Wherever work is done in school can quickly be undone beyond its gates. This is why I encourage teachers to take an empathetic approach, to consider the reasons behind difficult behaviour before getting frustrated with it. These reasons can be much more complex than we often think, and it is important to know the young person in question, and to come from a position of understanding and support.

- Medical/conditions (e.g. ADHD, Autism)
- Difficulties and inactivity and insecurity about ability (leading to work avoidance or distracting behaviour)
- Self-esteem issues (pupils may use "showing off" as a way of making a lack of self worth)
- Limited communication skills and inadequate diet being common culprits (increased weight, lack of peer pressure, lack of role models)
- We lack skills to internalise and understand, (behavioural difficulties, self expression)

Multi-agency team

A great deal of work in identifying, of course, takes time, space and expertise - luxuries that many teachers simply do not have enough of. It is time we took time, space and expertise into account.

- Establishing class rules/boundaries and expectations (and giving frequent reminders of these)
- Giving clear instructions (some pupils may have extremely low visual awareness as well)
- Setting time limited expectations (e.g. "These are the limits..."
- Providing counters (Two minutes left before ..."). Staying true to pupils for change
- Telling children what they are doing, and making children a part of the process (classroom/setting/setting, etc)
- Basing routines to help organise the day (arrangements, procedures, keeping classes in class/learning/individual, etc.

Whilst much of my work is with teachers and classroom assistants, I realise that the successful management of challenging behaviour is not one that simply begins and ends within the four walls of a classroom. Most of the time, the young people that I encounter are living with disorganisation, and the patterns of their lives can be extremely chaotic. All too often, I find myself in confrontation situations such as instability in the home, insufficient nurturing, neglect, abuse and poverty. Wherever work is done in school can quickly be undone beyond its gates. This is why I encourage teachers to take an empathetic approach, to consider the reasons behind difficult behaviour before getting frustrated with it. These reasons can be much more complex than we often think, and it is important to know the young person in question, and to come from a position of understanding and support.

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