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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, education writer 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 courted much media attention, creating a rather gloomy image of Britain's schools. They have also made infamous the 'beast' that lies at the heart of it all: the hood-wearing, dope-smoking, authority-disrespecting little hooligan that spends more time setting fire to parked cars than sitting in a crowded classroom. Personally, I feel there should be more room in the news to celebrate all the good practice that is out there, for I have seen some fantastic teaching, some excellent examples of whole-school work, and more than a handful of very difficult young people actually achieving great things. In my writing, I try to bring all of these positive aspects together and provide ideas and solutions for people who work with challenging individuals.

Debunk the myth

I am keen to help debunk the myth that behaviour management is some sort magical gift bestowed on a lucky few, that it is all about mind games, power and innate cleverness. Successful practice can actually be very simple, even formulaic. Many helpful behavioural strategies are most effective when they follow routine steps, allowing both student and teacher to be clear about what the expectations are. Unfortunately, this does not necessarily make practice effortless - for it still requires time, energy and incredible amounts of patience!

The key things I emphasise are:

- ♦ Calmness (avoid shouting, aggression or confrontation)
- ♦ Fairness (allow them the chance to explain or put things right, give warnings before enacting consequences)
- ♦ Firmness (speak assertively, be direct, use commands instead of questions, 'thank you'

instead of 'please')

- ♦ Positivity (give praise where possible, use reward/incentive systems, notice improvements)
- ♦ Consistency ('whole school' approaches, maintaining 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 can find it difficult to cope when they have boundaries and structures changed or removed. This can cause anxiety, excitability and result in disruptive outbursts (for example, break and lunch times have always been notoriously problematic for these individuals).

Unpredictable situations may also make a young person feel threatened or vulnerable, increasing the likelihood of aggressive, defensive behaviour occurring. It is therefore important to make young people aware of what to expect, and what is expected of them, wherever possible. Teachers can do this by:

- ♦ Establishing class rules/boundaries and expectations (and giving frequent reminders of these)
- ♦ Giving clear instructions (some pupils may benefit from visual reminders as well as verbal)
- ♦ Setting time limited expectations (e.g. 'Three paragraphs in thirty minutes...')
- ♦ Providing countdowns ('Five minutes left before we tidy up...' allowing pupils to prepare for change)
- ♦ Issuing warnings before enacting consequences, being specific about what students need to do ('You need to...or you will have to...')
- ♦ Using routines to help organise the day (lining up, seating plans, procedures for speaking in class/moving around/tidying up, etc)

Whilst much of my work is with teachers and school staff, I realise that the issue of challenging behaviour is not one that simply begins and ends within the four walls of a classroom. Most of the challenging young people that I encounter are living with deprivation, and the patterns of their lives can be extremely chaotic. All too often, I find myself confronting issues such as instability in the home, insufficient nurture, neglect, abuse and ineffective parenting. Whatever work is done in school can quickly be undone beyond its gates.

This is why I encourage readers to take

an empathic approach, to consider the reasons behind difficult behaviour before getting frustrated with it. These reasons can be wide and varied, so it is important to get to know the young person in question, and to come from a position of understanding and awareness. A few suggestions:

- ♦ Medical conditions/disorders (e.g. ADHD, Autism)
- ♦ Learning difficulties and insecurity about ability (leading to work avoidance or distracting behaviours)
- ♦ Self-esteem issues (pupils may use 'showing off' as a way of masking a lack of self worth)
- ♦ Unfulfilled physiological needs (lack of sleep and inadequate diet being common culprits)
- ♦ Inappropriate social influences (peer pressure, lack of role models)
- ♦ Unresolved emotional issues (anger, resentment, bereavement, difficulties with self expression)

Multi-agency team

Addressing these underlying issues, of course, takes time, space and expertise - luxuries that many class teachers simply do not have enough of. I spent some time working in a multi-agency team (comprised of education, health, psychology and social service professionals) that provided support for schools and families of pupils at risk of exclusion, and I am a keen advocate of this collaborative, systemic practice. 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 society.

Nevertheless, we need to start somewhere. And perhaps a good place is in occasionally reminding ourselves that young people today have a lot to contend with, that they will not necessarily benefit from being constantly blamed, shamed and labelled for their difficulties. It is important that we also understand behaviour management to be something beyond getting young people to sit still in classrooms and work quietly. If we truly want to help these individuals, we need to invest resources and energy into encouraging them to reflect on their attitudes and reactions to situations, understanding how their behaviour impacts on others, and recognising their responsibility for themselves. We need to enable them to manage their own behaviour, rather than doing it all for them...and that is the real challenge.