

Classroom Problems: *What Can I Do Right Away?*
A Learning Supports Practice Series for Teachers*

Fidgety Students

We hear from many teachers about this matter. Here are two recent requests:

(1) *I have several students who have a hard time sitting in their seats for instruction. Any suggestions?*

(2) *I have several students who are easily distracted, can't stay on task, need a lot redirection. ... Needless to say, they are having little success in the classroom. I have tried reinforcement, but it doesn't work. What other interventions would be appropriate?*

Rather than making it a control problem, let's assume that the students need some accommodations (e.g., standing up at times while working, periodically getting up at their seat for a few minutes break) and maybe some prosocial opportunities to move about (e.g., helping the teacher with some tasks).

Here are some immediate practices excerpted from variety of sources:

From Great Classroom Accommodations –

http://www.healthyplace.com/communities/add/judy/teaching_tools_1.htm

“Allow for extra movement. When given a choice, some students have trouble sitting at a table with feet on the floor to study homework. Indeed, when they had to study in a setting that didn't allow movement, their performance declined. I've seen classrooms where children are allowed to sit on low tables, or even under the tables, to read and write. The room was relatively quiet and orderly, even though there were a number of children with impulsivity and hyperactivity. You see, when the impulsivity and hyperactivity is accommodated, it tends to diminish with such accommodations.

Build a quiet corner. A soft rug, some beanbag chairs, make-due foam pillows in a back corner offers a more natural setting for leisure reading.

Study carrels offer privacy and personal space when needed. Carrels can be placed against the back wall or folding individual carrels can be constructed of hardboard and placed on the student's desk. Student can decorate as desired.

Preferential seating. Some students may perform better when seated near the teacher and where visual distractions are reduced. Others are so self-conscious when seated up front, it actually diminishes their performance. This has to be an individual call.”

From *Strategies for counselors and teachers* (by Robert Reid in *Counseling and Human Development*, 2001) –

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3934/is_200102/ai_n8941490

“...Physical changes can help students who need physical activity. One straightforward accommodation is to provide desks: two desks in the front of the room, one on each side. Whenever a student needs physical activity, he or she simply moves to the other desk. Along with this, students are taught how to move from one desk to another (e.g., take all work/materials necessary, move directly to the new desk, don't speak to other students while making the move).

Another simple accommodation for students who need more physical activity is a standup desk – a desk that has been raised to approximately chest height, allowing the student to stand and work. This can be done quite simply by extending desk legs to the maximum or by placing the desk on blocks. Stand-up desks help allow for physical movement during independent work. Combining various types of seating arrangements may be desirable. For example, a child might have one normal desk, one stand-up desk, and one study carrel, each of which would be appropriate for different instructional activities.

For children who have difficulty remaining on-task, one effective accommodation is to have them work in study carrels. These are a simple, inexpensive means of greatly decreasing distractions. One potential problem with study carrels is that some students may perceive them as punitive, especially if they are used in conjunction with time-out. To avoid this problem, one clever teacher told her students that they could use carrels as a “special office.” Using the “office” was contingent upon appropriate behavior (“the office is only for working”). Students were allowed to put up a sign with their name when they used their “office,” and to sign up to reserve “office time,” and they were encouraged to move to their special office whenever they felt distracted.

Seating arrangements and instructional grouping also can affect students who have trouble sitting still because of proximity to other students who might pose potential distractions or unwittingly reinforce inappropriate behavior...”

From our Center: Be careful not to assume that fidgety students are ADHD. A few may be, but the reality is that fidgetedness is a common characteristic of a lot of individuals. Furthermore, many students are fidgety and increasingly so when they are not well engaged in learning in the classroom.

The danger with students who are not engaged is that they fill their time with behavior that not only is not productive, but often is disruptive, and this leads to negative encounters with the teacher and other school staff. In turn, this leads to a cycle of encounters that produce negative attitudes toward the teacher, school, and classroom learning. Thus, the first intervention concern for us is to “above all do no harm” with respect to the student's intrinsic motivation toward coming to school and for classroom learning (e.g., the youngster's feelings of competence, self-determination, relatedness to teacher and peers). To minimize threats to motivation, it is essential to personalize learning through accommodations that produce a good match to the student's interests and capabilities.

In this respect, one place to start is with ideas stemming from the literature on prereferral interventions and classroom accommodations designed to improve the match or "fit" between the classroom programs and the youngster's interests and capabilities.

Thus, over the long run, the best strategy to address this problem and a range of other behavior problems is to personalize learning. This tends to take care of most problems and then special assistance and accommodations can be reserved for those who really need it.

Some Immediate Things to Try

In general, the immediate need is to make changes to (a) improve the match between a youngster's program and his/her interests and capabilities and (b) try to find ways for her/him to have a special, positive status in class, at the school, and in the community. Talk and work with other staff in developing ideas along these lines.

- Add resources for extra support (aide, volunteers, peer tutors) to help the youngster's efforts to learn and perform. Create time to interact and relate with the youngster as an individual.
- Discuss with the youngster (and those in the home) why the problems are occurring.
- Specifically focus on exploring matters with the youngster that will suggest ways to enhance positive motivation.
- Change aspects of the program (e.g., materials, environment) to provide a better match with his/her interests and skills.
- Provide enrichment options (in and out of class).
- Use resources such as volunteers, aides, and peers to enhance the youngster's social support network.
- Specifically focus on exploring ways those in the home can enhance their problem-solving efforts.
- If necessary include other staff (e.g., counselor, principal) in a special discussion with the youngster exploring reasons for the problem and ways to enhance positive involvement at school and in class.

Note: The Center has a range of resources related to this topic. For example, see the Center's continuing education units on:

>*Engaging and Re-engaging Students and Families*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagei.pdf>

>*Personalizing Learning and Addressing Barriers to Learning*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/dbsimple2.asp?primary=2104&number=9958>

***Classroom Problems: What Can I Do Right Away? A Learning Supports Practice Series for Teachers**

Often the best way to learn is by addressing a specific concern that needs an immediate response.

With this in mind, the Center is producing a series of resources focused on daily classroom dilemmas teachers experience and some initial ways to deal with such concerns. The emphasis is on engaging and re-engaging students in classroom learning.

As a school moves to develop a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports, this series can help augment professional development by providing a stimulus for discussion by teachers and other staff.

What can I do right away?

To date, this learning supports practice series for teachers includes the following topics:

- > *Bullying* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/bullypn.pdf>
- > *Disengaged Students* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/disengpn.pdf>
- > *Fidgety Students* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/fidgetypn.pdf>
- > *Homework Avoidance* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/homeworkpn.pdf>
- > *Students in Distress* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/distresspn.pdf>
- > *Minimizing Referrals out of the Classroom* –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/referralspn.pdf>
- > *Addressing Neighborhood Problems that Affect the School* –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/neighpn.pdf>

See the complete series and other resources for professional development at
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>
(Click on Resources/Publications)

**Feel free to email similar concerns to the Center for discussion as part of
our weekly community of practice listserv. See
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mhpractitioner/practitioner.pdf>**

Prepared by the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Phone: (310) 825-3634 email: smhp@ucla.edu website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Feel free to share and reproduce this document; no permission is needed.
If you have comments, suggestions, examples you would like to share, please let us know.

Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu