

About Addressing Behavior Problems Broadly

Clearly, student misbehavior can be a barrier to learning. Misbehavior disrupts; it may be hurtful; it may disinhibit others. In their efforts to deal with deviant and devious behavior and to create safe environments, schools unfortunately often *overrely* on social control strategies (e.g., rules, surveillance, consequences). Ironically, such practices model behavior that can foster rather than counter development of negative values and frequently produce other forms of undesired behavior.

An often stated assumption underlying many social control practices is that stopping misbehavior will make the student amenable to teaching. In a few cases, this may be so. However, the assumption ignores all the work that has led to understanding *psychological reactance* and the need to restore one's sense of self-determination. Moreover, it belies two painful realities: the number of students who continue to manifest poor academic achievement and the staggering dropout rate in too many schools.

A Broad Perspective on Addressing Behavior Problems

While some misbehavior is unintentional, much of what is seen at school is intentional. Intentional misbehavior may be *proactive* or *reactive*. The actions may be direct or indirect and include defiance, physical and psychological withdrawal, and manipulative and diversionary tactics. Given the nature and scope behavior problems, schools need to approach the matter broadly. As outlined in the Exhibit on the following page, this involves

- *Preventing and anticipating misbehavior* (e.g., improve programs to enhance student engagement and minimize conditions that foment misbehavior; enhance home responsibility for childrens' behavior and learning; promote a school climate that embraces a holistic and family-centered orientation; work with students to establish a set of logical consequences that are reasonable, fair, and nondenigrating).
- *Responding quickly when misbehavior occurs* (e.g., reestablish a calm and safe atmosphere and apply established logical consequences in keeping with the framework for personalization and special assistance)
- *Following-up after an event* (e.g., make program changes if necessary; prevent further problems with those who misbehaved by following-up with special assistance).

As the Exhibit highlights, the concern involves more than the school. It also underscores that, while teachers must learn to use disciplinary practices effectively to deal with misbehavior, schools also must teach self-discipline and personal responsibility to students. The aim is not just to temporarily control bad behavior. Misbehavior presents a teachable moment for enhancing social and moral development. Students can learn about personal responsibility, integrity, selfregulation/self-discipline, a work ethic, appreciation of diversity, and positive feelings about self and others.

While teachers must learn to use disciplinary practices effectively to deal with misbehavior, schools also must teach self-discipline and personal responsibility to students. The aim is not just to temporarily control bad behavior. Misbehavior presents a teachable moment for enhancing social and moral development. Students can learn about personal responsibility, integrity, self-regulation/self-discipline, a work ethic, appreciation of diversity, and positive feelings about self and others. Interventions to address chronic misbehavior are designed to (a) prevent and overcome negative attitudes toward school and learning, (b) enhance motivational readiness for learning and overcoming problems, (c) maintain intrinsic motivation throughout learning and problem solving, and (d) nurture continuing motivation so students engage in activities away from school that foster maintenance, generalization, and expansion of learning and problem solving.

*The material in this document draws some content from a project report by Vivian Cheung (Ho Yan) as part of her involvement with the national Center for M H in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

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A Broad Outline for Dealing with Misbehavior

I. Preventing Misbehavior

- A. Expand Social Programs
 - 1. Increase economic opportunity for low income groups
 - 2. Augment health and safety prevention and maintenance (encompassing parent education and direct child services)
 - 3. Extend quality day care and early education
- B. Improve and Enrich Schooling
 - 1. Personalize and enrich classroom instruction (e.g., to accommodate and engage a wide range of motivational and developmental differences)
 - 2. Provide status opportunities for nonpopular students (e.g., special roles as assistants and tutors)
 - 3. Identify and remedy skill deficiencies early
- C. Follow-up All Occurrences of Misbehavior to Remedy Causes
 - 1. Identify underlying motivation for misbehavior
 - 2. For unintentional misbehavior, strengthen coping skills (e.g., social skills, problem solving strategies)
 - 3. If misbehavior is intentional but reactive, work to eliminate conditions that produce reactions (e.g., conditions that make the student feel incompetent, controlled, or unrelated to significant others)
 - 4. For proactive misbehavior, offer appropriate and attractive alternative ways the student can pursue a sense of competence, control, and relatedness
 - 5. Equip the individual with acceptable steps to take instead of misbehaving (e.g., options to withdraw from a situation or to try relaxation techniques)
 - 6. Enhance the individual's motivation and skills for overcoming behavior problems (including altering negative attitudes toward school)

II. Anticipating Misbehavior

- A. Personalize Supports for High Risk Students
 - 1. Identify underlying motivation for misbehavior
 - 2. Design curricula to consist primarily of activities that are a good match with the identified individual's intrinsic motivation and developmental capability
 - 3. Provide extra support and direction so the identified individual can cope with difficult situations (including steps that can be taken instead of misbehaving)
- B. Develop Consequences for Misbehavior that are Perceived by Students as Logical (i.e., that are perceived by the student as reasonable fair, and nondegrading so as not to reduce the student's sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to significant others)

III. During Misbehavior

- A. Try to base response on understanding of underlying motivation (if uncertain, start with assumption the misbehavior is unintentional)
- B. Reestablish a calm and safe atmosphere
 - 1. Use understanding of student's underlying motivation for misbehaving to clarify what occurred (if feasible involve participants in discussion of events)
 - 2. Validate each participant's perspective and feelings
 - 3. Indicate how the matter will be resolved emphasizing use of previously agreed upon logical consequences that have been personalized in keeping with understanding of underlying motivation
 - 4. If the misbehavior continues, revert to a firm but nonauthoritarian statement
 - 5. As a last resort use back-up resources
 - a. If appropriate, ask student's friends to help
 - b. Call for help from identified back-up personnel
 - 6. Throughout the process, keep others calm by dealing with the situation with a calm and protective demeanor

IV. After Misbehavior

- A. Implement Discipline/Restorative Justice
- B. Discuss the Problem with Parents
 - 1. Explain ways to avoid exacerbating the problem
 - 2. Mobilize them to work preventively with school
- C. Work Toward Prevention of Further Occurrences (see I & II)

For more, see:
Behavioral Initiatives in Broad Perspective –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/behavioral/behini.pdf>

After making broad programmatic changes to the degree feasible, intervention with a misbehaving student involves personalized special assistance. The initial focus is on enhancing understanding of the student's underlying motivation (e.g., Is the behavior reactive or proactive? If reactive, is it a reaction to threats to self-determination, competence, or relatedness?) Motivational analyses of the problem help design appropriate corrective steps.

All this calls for improving staff understanding of underlying motivation and working with the community to develop a comprehensive, systemic approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and promoting healthy development. And, looking to the future, we see a trend to (1) apply an expanded view of motivation that draws on the latest thinking about intrinsic motivation and (2) embed practices for preventing and responding to misbehavior into the type of unified, comprehensive, and equitable system the Center has discussed in detail (see the references below).

For a more in-depth discussion, see

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2017). *Addressing barriers to learning: in the classroom and schoolwide*. Online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/improve.pdf>

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2018). *Improving school improvement*. Online at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/improve.pdf>

Center for Mental Health in Schools (2011). *Embedded bullying interventions into a comprehensive system of student and learning supports*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/embeddingbullying.pdf>

A Note About Attending to Teachers' Well-Being

The impact of student misbehavior on staff well-being too often is neglected. The person-environment fit model of job stress recognizes the need to improve the fit between the individual and the work environment. This involves enhancing work environment conditions and personal capabilities and attitudes. These are essential facets of countering burnout (Center for Mental Health in Schools,

With respect to enhancing work conditions, school improvements need to ensure there is a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports (see above references). Such a system is fundamental to alleviating incidents of student misbehavior that take a toll on teachers. It encompasses processes for enhancing teachers' capabilities to address students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems, and it provides regular collegial supports (e.g., extra hands in the classroom, staff teaming, mentoring, coaching).

Recognizing the importance of promoting teachers well-being, the program, Guiding Responsibility and Expectation for Adolescents for Today and Tomorrow (GREAT), has a module for teaching them to cope with stress and regulate their emotional and physical well-being (Orpinas, Horne, & Multisite Violence Prevention Project 2004). Specifically, it encourages teachers to analyze their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. For example, teachers write down how they are handling student aggressive behaviors and what feelings and thoughts the misbehavior arouses. The awareness is seen as helping prevent negative thoughts and enabling more effective action.

Staff mutual support groups also can be established. Such groups provide emotional support and empathic understanding, and members can acquire practical advice and information from colleagues who are experiencing similar predicaments. Mutual support groups also provide the opportunity for optimistic peer comparisons, as members realize with relief that their problems really are not so extraordinary and that others with similar problems are working toward their resolution (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2003).

All this can reduce, but will not eliminate stress. So, in addition, school staff need to learn how to handle on-the-job stress personally.

Short of psychotherapy, a wide range of techniques for managing personal stress are discussed in the literature and are offered on the internet. Varvogli and Darviri (2011) discuss the following evidence based stress managing techniques: progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, relaxation response, biofeedback, emotional freedom technique, guided imagery, diaphragmatic breathing, transcendental meditation, cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction and emotional freedom technique. The following are examples of easily practiced techniques:

- *Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)*. This relaxation exercise involves first tensing a group of muscles sequentially starting from legs, abdomen, chest, arms, and then face for ten seconds and then relaxing for approximately 20 seconds.
- *Relaxation response (RR)*. Two facets characterizing a relaxation program are: (1) repetition of a word, sound, prayer, thought, phrase or muscular movement to achieve concentration and (2) passive return to the repetition when other thoughts intrude.
- *Diaphragmatic Breathing*. Breathing in ways that expand the abdomen rather than the chest.

Anyone who works in schools knows about burnout. Staggering workloads, major problems, and endless hassles are the name of the game. The many stressors, major and minor, affect staff (and student) morale and mental health and counter efforts to enhance school climate. With all this in mind, broad strategies must be pursued in addressing behavior problems so that schools are transformed in ways that significantly enhance supports for students, their families, and school staff.

References Cited in this Section

- Center for Mental Health in Schools (2003). *School-Based Mutual Support Groups (For Parents, Staff, Older Students)*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA.
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/support/support1.pdf>
- Center for Mental Health in Schools (2015). *Understanding and Minimizing Staff Burnout*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA.
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- Orpinas, P., Horne, A. M., & Multisite Violence Prevention Project (2004). A teacher-focused approach to prevent and reduce students' aggressive behavior: the GREAT Teacher Program. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 26, (1 Suppl), 29-38. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2003.09.016
- Varvogli, L., & Darviri, C. (2011). Stress management techniques: evidence-based procedures that reduce stress and promote health. *Health Science Journal*, 5, 74-89.
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