

When Students Are Disruptive: 10 Ideas to Try



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One student can change the feel of a whole classroom. John throws a tantrum whenever things don't go his way. Alicia enters the room each morning with a deep scowl exuding negative energy. Allen has way too much sexual knowledge and seems to say something inappropriate whenever you're out of earshot, offending and upsetting other students.

It's hard not to be resentful of these students. We secretly may wish they would move—our lives would be so much easier without them. And yet, these are the students who need us the most. These are the kids who may not have any other stable adults in their lives. They need us. But then again, so do all of our other students, many of whom have plenty of other less dramatic—but still important—challenges. How can we support these students who struggle, take care of the rest of our class, and maintain some semblance of sanity ourselves? There aren't any silver bullet cures, but the following strategies might serve as helpful starting points.

Be gentle with yourself. There's no doubt that students with severe challenges can wear us down. Whenever possible, try and reduce your feelings of guilt and failure. Say to yourself, "Tom is having a tough time right now," instead of, "Tom is ruining my lesson! I feel like a failure!" At the end of each day, jot down a few things that went well so that you are reminding yourself of the good stuff too!

Take care of the rest of the class. One student can't be allowed to make it so twenty-five other students can't learn. Also, when a student becomes out of control in class, it can be scary for everyone else, making school feel less safe. We may not be able to "fix" a student's behavior, but we can help protect the rest of the class. Have a place for this student to go when they're melting down. Your students deserve to have your best teaching.

Connect personally. What are Marie's interests outside of school? Is she into basketball? Is she interested in music, and if so, what are her favorite groups? Is she into video games? I once listened to a whole lot of boy-band music I didn't love so I could talk about it with a challenging student. It afforded us some nice moments between our daily struggles.

Focus on baby steps. Try (as much as possible) to focus on Luke’s successes, no matter how small. A “good” reading period might be one where he only gets up twice, even if your expectation is that everyone sits for the whole reading period. Make sure to recognize this “leading edge behavior”: “Hey Alex! I noticed that you only got up twice today during reading. That’s your best so far this week!”

Find some special opportunities and privileges. All too often, kids who struggle get hammered more and more for the challenges they face, never getting any kinds of special treats or chances to do something different. Consider setting Brian up as a tutor for a needy younger child where he gets to work with that child every day for 20 minutes (or two or three times a week). Not only will it boost Brian’s sense of self-worth (to be needed is a very powerful thing), but it will also give you a 20-minute respite each day...not a bad bonus.

Don’t rely on consequences or rewards. Although consequences might be necessary to stop misbehaviors before they escalate, they aren’t good long-term solutions. Similarly, [rewards and incentives](#) assume that kids are choosing to be out of control and just need to be motivated. Remember, as Ross Greene says, [kids do well if they can](#), so we need to find out what’s getting in their way and then help them learn new strategies for self-control.

Have Empathy. Have you ever been emotionally or physically out of control? It’s terrifying. It’s embarrassing. That doesn’t mean that we should shrug, sigh (“bless her heart”), and do nothing. We must act, and when our actions come from a place of empathy, compassion, and love, they will have the tone of support and caring that our students need.

Get help. Children with the toughest problems require group efforts. When students aren’t reading in fifth grade, we devote whole teams of teachers to figuring out how to help them, and the same should be true when behaviors are extreme. We can sometimes slip into thinking, “If I was a really good teacher, I could handle every problem that comes my way.” Wrong! Surgeons call team meetings to diagnose difficult challenges. Firefighters call for back-up and rely on team efforts. We need to do the same.

Use a multi-pronged approach and be patient. We wouldn’t expect to sit down with a struggling reader, share one new strategy, and have their reading improve dramatically all at once. Instead, we will find just-right books, help them learn many new strategies, and get them the support of the reading specialist and remedial tutors. The same is true of students who struggle with severe behavior challenges. They need many strategies and the help of many people over a long period of time. Progress, not perfection, should be the goal.

Take care of yourself. Go for a hike. Play the piano. Have a glass of wine in front of the fireplace. Do yoga. Watch a fun movie. Cook a delicious (and healthy) dinner and make sure to save leftovers for lunch. Take a quick walk at lunchtime. Connect with colleagues. Focus on your strengths and celebrate your successes. [When we take care of our own needs](#), we’ll have the positive energy needed to take care of others!

Teach Like a Champion

Five Principles of Classroom Culture

Discipline: Teach students step by step, what successful learning behavior looks like.

Management: Teach students to do things right, don't just establish consequences for doing them wrong. To truly succeed you must be able to control students, that is, get them to do things regardless of consequence, and to inspire and engage them in positive work.

Control: Understand the power of language and relationships: ask respectfully, firmly, and confidently but also with civility, and often kindly. Express your faith in students. Ex. "Please return to your seat and begin writing in your journal."

Influence: Connect to your students and inspire them to want for themselves the things the class is trying to achieve. Goals, objectives and products- communicate this with students every day.

Engagement: Give students plenty to say yes to, plenty to get involved in, plenty to those themselves in. This gives them little time to think about how to act counterproductively and lots that seems important and interesting to focus their energy on.

Technique 28: Entry Routine

-Make a habit out of what's efficient, productive and scholarly after the greeting and as students take their seats and class begins.

Technique 29: Do Now

-A short activity that you have written on the board or is waiting at their desks before they enter.

-Four criteria for "Do Now":

1. Students should be able to complete the Do Now without any direction from the teacher and without any discussion with their classmates.
2. The activity should take three to five minutes to complete.
3. The activity should require putting a pencil to paper, that is, there should be a written product from it.
4. That activity should preview the day's lesson or review a recent lesson.

Technique 30: Tight Transitions

-When you teach students to transition effectively, scaffold the steps in the transition.

“When I say one, please stand and push in your chairs. When I say two, please turn to face the door. When I say three, please follow your line leader to the place to line up.”

Technique 32: SLANT

-Sit Up

-Listen

-Ask and answer questions

-Nod your head.

- Track the speaker

CHAMPS

-Conversation level

- Help

- Activity

-Movement

-Participation

On-the-Spot TPTs (Total Participation Techniques)

1. Think-Pair-Share: Ask students to reflect on a question or prompt; give them a brief amount of time (30 seconds); ask students to pair up or to turn to their assigned partner; ask them to discuss their responses.

2. Quick-Writes: Select a prompt that you would like students to address; give students a specified amount of time to collect their thoughts and jot down a response; follow up with Pair-Share or a Chalkboard Splash.

3. Chalkboard Splash: Create a sentence starter, prompt, or question for which you would like all students to see of all their peers' responses; ask students to generate responses, ask them to copy their responses onto random or designated places on the whiteboards or chart paper; debrief by asking students to complete a gallery walk to analyze and jot down similarities, differences and surprises; ask students to get into small groups and share what they noticed in terms of similarities, differences, and surprises before asking volunteers to share.