

Classroom Management: The Law of Least Intervention

How to Stop MINOR Classroom Disturbances

By Adam Waxler

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“The best classroom management plan is a strong instructional plan”

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Adam has also played a big role in teacher recruitment as well as new teacher training. He currently owns and operates several web sites that provide resources to help teachers become better teachers.

For information on some of his other work visit these web sites:

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Introduction

If you have read any of my work then you know I am a big proponent of the using a *proactive* approach to classroom management. My goal is to stop classroom disturbances BEFORE they start. I do this by using teaching strategies that increase student motivation, increase class participation and basically keep my students involved throughout the entire lesson.

(For more on proactive classroom management sign up for my e-course @ www.Classroom-Management-Tips.com)

However, regardless of how effective a teacher uses proactive classroom management strategies, *minor* disruptions will still occur in the classroom. Before we go any further let me make one thing perfectly clear here...this report is about stopping MINOR classroom management problems. Those nagging issues that don't seem drastic enough to write a referral for, but can still be extremely disruptive to learning and can simply gnaw away at a teacher's last nerve.

Issues such as talking while the teacher is talking, writing or passing notes, and minor roughhousing.

There are two common ways in which teachers deal with these nagging classroom management issues...

In order to avoid being the tough disciplinarian, many teachers choose to simply ignore minor misbehaviors altogether. The problem with this approach is that the misbehavior will most likely NOT go away...In fact,

the misbehavior will most likely escalate and the teacher will be forced to deal with it anyway. Therefore, ignoring the misbehavior is just too risky.

On the other hand, some teachers use the *strict* approach by reacting to *every* minor disturbance and may administer punishment regardless of the degree of severity of misbehavior.

The problem with this approach is that it presents the teacher as a negative role model, and it may lead to an overall negative feeling in the classroom and towards learning and school in general.

Furthermore, the teacher's response may actual cause greater disruption to learning than the student's original misbehavior.

Let me repeat that last line again because it is the basis for what this whole report is about:

The teacher's response may actual cause greater disruption to learning than the student's original misbehavior.

That's right, all too often it is the teacher who is the one causing the disruption...OK, maybe the teacher isn't the *original* cause, but I have observed many teachers who actually turn the *minor* disruption into a *major* disruption all by themselves.

The problem is if the teacher stops the lesson to discipline 1 or 2 students for some minor misbehavior then the class went from 1 or 2 students being off task to 20 or 30 students being off task. Again, the teacher may not have caused the original minor disruption, but the

teacher can certainly be blamed for the other 20 to 30 kids being off task.

So what's a teacher to do?

The answer: The teacher must find a balance between plain ignoring and forceful intervention. The key to handling these minor disruptions is to make sure the lesson itself does not stop.

Many experts call this the "Law of Least Intervention".

The basic concept is simple...the teacher uses a series of steps that require the **least** amount of teacher time and **least** amount of disruption to the lesson. The teacher starts with the first step requiring the very **least** intervention and if that doesn't work quickly moves up the ladder to the next step which requires slightly more intervention and so on.

By using this approach the teacher can maintain a positive learning environment while at the same time *maximize* time on task. And, as I have stated time and time again, when students are on task they are much less likely to disrupt the class.

Remember, the intervention should take the **least** amount of time...the **least** amount of teacher effort...create the **least** unpleasant feeling for both teacher and student...and have the **least** disruption to the learning environment.

This report is designed to bring you through a series of steps that I use on the ladder of *least intervention*. These are *very* simple steps that any teacher can use, regardless of grade level or subject area.

Many of these strategies may seem like common sense, but all too often in the “heat of battle” we forget about common sense and resort to strict discipline instead. Let this report be a reminder of some of those common sense strategies that can and should be used everyday.

Step #1

The first step on the ladder of least intervention is quite simple. However, do NOT underestimate the power of this simple strategy.

Here it is: **eye contact**

An effective classroom manager is constantly scanning the room. This constant scanning will stop many misbehaviors from ever occurring and will prevent other misbehaviors from escalating. Remember the vast majority of classroom disturbances start out from minor incidents that quickly escalate.

However, if this automatic scanning does not stop the disturbance then it is time for the teacher to stop scanning and make direct and prolonged eye contact with the student who is causing the problem.

The rest of the students do not even notice what is happening and the lesson does not miss a beat. However, the non-verbal message to the problem student was loud and clear..."I see what you are doing...now stop and don't let it happen again."

Again, don't underestimate how important eye contact is during a lesson. By effectively scanning the room and making prolonged eye contact when necessary you can stop classroom management problems *without* having to stop the lesson.

If that doesn't work, its time to take it to the next step...

Step #2

Sometimes eye contact fails to stop a student from minor misbehaviors...maybe this is because the student is not looking at the teacher or maybe it is too subtle of an approach for the student to recognize the teacher's intent.

When this happens simply move onto the next step of least intervention... ****Physical Closeness****

In others words...move to the proximity of the disturbance.

A teacher who is able to continue teaching while moving about the room can easily stop problems with just his physical presence.

The fact is it is very unlikely that students will continue their disruptive behavior if the teacher is standing right next to them.

Also, getting physically close to the students who are off-task allows for direct eye contact that may not have been possible earlier.

Most importantly though, using this approach does not require the teacher to stop the lesson and does not bring any embarrassment to the student. In other words...*the lesson doesn't miss a beat!*

This could be the single most powerful classroom management strategy that exists. Not only is it extremely effective, but it's so simple to implement.

Step #3

The next step on the ladder of least intervention... **The Pause**

Sometimes scanning the room, making eye contact, and/or moving to the proximity of the disturbance are not accomplishing their desired goal of stopping students from talking when they shouldn't be.

This can be quite frustrating for a teacher and often times leads a teacher to raise his voice or even yell at the students to stop what they are doing.

Well...may I suggest a different approach...do just the opposite.

That's right, instead of yelling (or even raising your voice) simply "pause".

When you have the respect of your students, a prolonged pause in instruction will most likely lead to an immediate silence from the class.

It is simply amazing how quickly an effective teacher can quiet down a room of students without saying a word. Once the students are re-focused, the teacher can then continue with the instruction...again, with very little disturbance to the lesson.

Step #4

The next step of least intervention is... **The Look**

Do not underestimate the power of this simple technique

Every teacher has one...the look that tells the student, "I see what you are doing...now stop it!"

The look only takes a second to deliver and can be done so without ever disrupting the lesson. In fact, if students are working in small groups and a couple of students are involved in some minor off-task behavior, a simple look can stop those students while the rest of the class never even noticed what happened.

While the look is similar to prolonged direct eye contact, it takes things a step further...the look conveys the message "I mean it!"

Step #5

Step #5 is actually something you should NOT do rather than something you should do.

If you are using eye contact effectively, pausing when necessary, moving to proximity of the classroom disturbance, giving an inappropriate student the look, and still the minor disruptive behavior continues...you may feel the need to put your hand on a student's shoulder to stop the disruptive behavior.

This is precisely what teachers did when I was a student and it worked. All I can say is, "Don't do it!"

I work with a lot of teachers who are career changers and I am always surprised at how many ask if it is okay to touch a student. I assume it is because this is what they remember from when they were in school.

The answer is "NO!"

Sure 99% of the time nothing will come of it and it may very well stop the inappropriate behavior without much, if any, disruption to the lesson. However, it just takes that 1% of the time...that one time a student misinterprets your intended meaning...that one student who is a little sensitive or overly dramatic...it just takes one time to ruin your career.

In the end it is just not worth yet...especially when the next step is just as effective, but without the potential repercussions.

Step #6

I hope you understand how important that last step was...please, please, please do NOT touch a student as a means to stop minor classroom disruptions...

However, a simple strategy you can use (instead of actually touching a student) which is just as effective, but without the potential repercussions is this:

Combine "the look" with body posture and gestures...

For the student who is out of his seat, giving him the "look" and then simply pointing to the student's desk may be more of a positive reminder of the appropriate behavior (and much less disruptive) than interrupting the whole class to tell the student to get back in his seat.

This works for many minor disturbances...if a student puts her feet up on a neighbor's desk then give the student your "look" while at the same time pointing your finger to floor (where her feet should be).

By all means point, lean, even touch a student's desk, but just don't touch the student himself...it's just not worth it...especially when the above method works just as well.

Step #7

There are times in every lesson that the teacher must *directly* teach. I am not a big fan of lecturing and rarely, if ever, use it as a teaching method, but there are times when I must have the attention of all students at the same time to explain something important.

Unfortunately, in these circumstances, if a student is talking with her classmate, she is not listening to me and is therefore not involved with the lesson and therefore much more likely to cause a classroom management issue.

Often times a teacher uses all sorts of "least intervention" strategies, but still the student just doesn't stop the minor chit-chat.

While it may be minor, it also must be stopped.

If other "least intervention" tactics have failed it may be time to accompany a question with a student's name to get her attention and have her refocus.

This can be very effective, but can also create problems.

The question is, do you say the student's name first, then ask a question or do you ask a question and then say the student's name?

Each has advantages and disadvantages.

If you say the question first and then the name, the student may become embarrassed and may deal with this "threat" with an attention-getting or hostile response.

On the other hand, if you state the student's name first, then the rest of the class doesn't even have to listen to the question because they know it's not for them.

My solution...

In my class, all my students know that they always have the option to say "pass" whenever they are asked a question. I tell them they can pass for any reason (don't know the answer, weren't paying attention, too tired etc.)

Students rarely use this pass option, but it does solve the problem above. I *always* ask the question first (this way all students in the class must pay attention) then I call on a student by name (without hand-raising).

Since students know they have an out (the pass option) they are much less likely to respond in a negative way. If they were not paying attention, they simply say "pass", yet, it also worked as a friendly reminder to refocus their attention on the lesson.

Step #8

When teachers are faced with minor disruptions it can often times be more effective to praise the good behavior of students while ignoring the bad behavior. While this "praise-and-ignore approach" will not solve all classroom management problems, it can be quite helpful, but only if done correctly.

Unfortunately, praise is not always given appropriately and effectively. Many teachers are merely "handing out compliments" and this will not do much to improve behavior.

Here are some tips for using praise appropriately:

1. Be specific when giving praise ~ Make sure praise is tied directly to appropriate behavior. Make sure the student understands the specific action or accomplishment that is being praised. For example, "Thank you for raising your hand and waiting to be called on" is much more effective than simply stating, "Great job."
2. Recognized genuine accomplishments ~ Do not praise uninvolved students just because they are quiet.
3. Base praise on individual abilities and limitations ~ Focus the student's attention on his or her own progress, not comparisons with others.
4. Connect the student's "success" with the student's "effort" ~ Don't imply the success is based on luck. For example, "I noticed that you

studied and double-checked your test questions this time, your test score reflects your hard work...great job!"

5. Make it believable ~ Don't give undeserved praise to students and don't attempt to influence the rest of the class by praising one or two students. For the most part praising students will help those particular students only...not necessarily the rest of class.

Step #9

Many of the strategies discussed so far will be most effective when dealing with only one or two students. However, when the numbers increase, addressing the class as a whole may be necessary.

Unfortunately, this is also where many teachers make a crucial mistake. That mistake is dealing out whole-class punishments. "If this class doesn't quiet down you'll all be in for recess!" If you want to lose the respect of those students who *ARE* behaving appropriately then go right ahead do this because that is all you will accomplish.

Instead, a better approach is to use something know as the Premack Principle (a.k.a. "Grandma's Law")

How does it work?

Simple...

According to "grandma's law" teachers should use a *preferred activity* as a reinforcer for a *less-preferred activity*.

For example, "If you can work quietly on your assignment for the next ten minutes, we'll have time for a game of social studies bingo."

Step #10

Want to stop minor disruptions without even mentioning it to your students?

Then use *cueing* strategies to stop the disruption.

Cueing is basically getting all your students to respond in a way that is NOT compatible with any undesired behavior.

For example, if a teacher is handing out a worksheet and has her students clear their desks of everything except something to write with, then that stops the two girls in the back who were writing notes to their friends...

...having all students write down an answer to a question rather than having just a few students raise their hands forces the boy in the other corner to put down the paper airplane and pick up his pen to write down an answer...

...having students put their heads down on the desk and visualize what life must have been like as a slave while the teacher reads about the Middle Passage will most certainly redirect and refocus Johnny and Suzy from talking about their weekend plans...

Cueing, when done properly, can be an extremely effective classroom management strategy AND instructional strategy.

Conclusion:

A word on proactive classroom management, the law of least intervention, and MAJOR disturbances

Personally, I am a big proponent of the using a proactive approach to classroom management. In fact, I teach a college course on classroom management that is entirely based on this approach AND I have written a 5-part classroom management e-course, that gives the basics of this proactive approach.

The goal of the proactive approach is to stop classroom disturbances BEFORE they start. I do this by using teaching strategies that increase student motivation, increase class participation and basically keep my students involved in the lesson.

(For more on proactive classroom management sign up for my e-course @ www.Classroom-Management-Tips.com)

However, even if you are using the proactive approach effectively, you will not eliminate all problems...minor problems will still occur...that's why you want to compliment your proactive approach by using the strategies of the *law of least intervention*.

The whole basis of *this* report how to use these *least intervention* strategies to stop *minor* disturbances...passing notes, writing notes, talking with a friend etc.

We've discussed many different strategies for handling these minor problems...eye contact, moving to the proximity of the disruption, the

pause, the look, the gesture, using student names appropriately, using praise effectively, the Premack principle (a.k.a. Grandma's Law), and cueing.

Obviously, these *least intervention* strategies go hand in hand with the proactive approach to classroom management.

What's great about using this approach is that in doing so you will not only be addressing *minor* classroom management issues, but since the vast majority of *major* classroom management problems start as minor issues that escalate, you will also be eliminating many of your *major* problems as well.

However, even if you are being proactive and even if you are using the law of least intervention, some major disturbances will unfortunately still occur (eliminating all problems is nearly impossible).

Fortunately, you will be faced with significantly fewer major disturbances if you use the proactive approach to classroom management accompanied with the strategies under the law of least intervention.

Yet, they still occur...

When this happens you obviously must become *re*-active. However, even when you must *re*-act to a disturbance in the classroom you should keep these three things in mind:

1. keep your cool

2. maintain the student's dignity (do not put the student down)
3. use punishment as last resort only

Why should teachers only use punishment as a last resort?

The answer is simple...you want to see long-term results rather than short-term results.

Remember, you want to create a lasting change in the student's behavior.

Here's the problem with punishment. Students often react to punishment in four ways:

1. resentment
2. revenge
3. lowering of self-esteem
4. quitting/giving up

Teachers should be interested in not just stopping the problem, but rather in solving the problem. Yes, punishment may stop the problem, but only temporarily. The problem with punishment is that it treats the symptom not the cause. What's worse, punishment often leads many students to react with the words, "I hate school."

That's the last thing we want to hear our students say...

So while there are times when a teacher must **re**-act to a situation, please try to use punishment as last resort only.

Author's Note

I truly hope you have found this report helpful. Just remember, information is just information unless you do something with it!

Also, an effective teacher is constantly changing, growing, and improving. To continue to be a truly successful teacher requires an *arsenal of effective teaching strategies* that you will continue to add to your repertoire throughout your career.

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