

Sometimes Misbehavior Is Not What It Seems



When Sigmund Freud reportedly said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," the key word was "sometimes," because sometimes a cigar is more than a cigar. So it is with understanding misbehavior. Sometimes the reason for misbehavior is very different than the obvious and requires a totally different intervention than the usual consequences. It is never easy to determine why children do the things they do.

The following are examples of seeing misbehavior from a new perspective. In each of these cases, diagnosis is very difficult -- as are the remedies. For chronic misbehaving students, pay close attention to their home situations, the type of misbehavior, when it occurs, and whether they behave differently with other adults. Be advised that the best responses to these situations sound easier than they are to put into practice.

1. Sometimes students misbehave because they like you too much.

Some students have experienced so much pain that they build a wall between themselves and everyone else. For those familiar with the Simon and Garfunkel song, it's the "I Am A Rock" syndrome:

*And a rock feels no pain
And an island never cries.*

The closer to you get to children like this, the greater their fear of getting hurt. As this fear intensifies, the more they try to push you away. The more the child pushes you away, the more you think that he either dislikes or disrespects you. When feeling disrespected or disliked, many teachers try to develop a closer relationship. While this strategy works for most students, it only frightens students like these into more dramatic methods of pushing you away.

2. Sometimes students want you to prove yourself.

Some students have been promised that things would be better only to have things get worse. Children shuffled through the foster care system are likely to feel this way. The same is true for students who have had teachers

that overly encouraged success and rewarded them for minor behavioral achievements, only to give up on them later. Sometimes children of divorced parents feel cheated and abandoned by one parent or the other. Before they can trust you, they continue pushing you, harder and harder, to see if you will give up on them, too.

The best approach for both of these two situations is the same. No matter what they do, *believe in them*, even if their behavior is serious or severe. Say things like, "What you just did is unacceptable in our classroom, but no matter what you do, I'm still on your side. I will never give up or stop believing in you." There are two big dangers in this approach:

1. You must *really mean it*. As Neil Postman once said, "Kids have built-in crap detectors." You can't fake believing in them. You really must feel that way.
2. If you do give up, you will be added to their list of adults who abandoned them. That will make it even harder for someone else to reach them. If you make a commitment, you must keep it. *Do not give up*.

3. Sometimes students are physically attracted to you.

Many teachers, especially those who look to be about the same age as their students, have trouble when students develop crushes on them. When students are attracted to their teacher, their goal becomes interaction. Obviously, they can't engage on a more romantic level (although some occasionally try), so they connect through the only other way that's open to them.

Younger children are sometimes attracted to their teachers in a different way, although with the same result. They see their teachers as mommies or daddies. I guess many of you who teach very young children have been called "Mommy" by mistake.

The solution, which many younger teachers have told me they object to, is to dress as professionally and unprovocatively as possible -- no jeans or anything that makes them seem as equals to students. Use a modest amount of makeup. Men do better with students who develop crushes by wearing a tie or at least a sport coat. Be friendly, but not as friends. Draw strong professional limits. Do not feed their fantasies.

4. Sometimes students need to be noticed.

Rollo May, in *Love and Will*, made a simple but profound statement when he said that attention for something bad is better than no attention at all. This theory explains, at least partially, some of the school violence by students in recent years. No one wants to feel anonymous or unseen. For these students, misbehavior is like raising a flag that says, "Notice me, I matter." Students like these often feel unnoticed at home, among other students, and by most of their teachers.

These students can be helped by greeting them at the door before class, calling on them more frequently, asking them to help perform academic tasks, like solving a problem on the whiteboard, or generally making sure they feel appreciated. Learn their names, say hello in the corridors, and occasionally seek them out on the playground or in the lunchroom for a brief conversation.

In all four of the situations above, certain sensitivities can be very helpful. Whether you're making positive or negative comments about behavior and academic performance, make those comments in private. Never publicly draw attention with comments such as, "I like the way that Allen is sitting." Never write their names on the whiteboard for any reason. Never discuss their situations with any other students or other parents. When talking with these students' parents, never blame either the children or parents. Be more stubborn than these chronically misbehaving students and never give up on them.