

Managing Behaviour in a Noisy Classroom

Children learn about the world in a variety of ways, and one of the most potent is through the examples adults give them. We model the behaviour and mannerisms that we want children to learn and from an early age they will emulate our habits and speech. Even their games are based upon adult occupations as they mimic the actions of doctors and nurses, and mothers and fathers.

Children learn about the values of society in the same way and notions of right and wrong become instilled and will often stay with them for life. Sometimes, however, contradictions occur which can be confusing. How often have you heard sayings like: 'you have to be cruel to be kind', or 'it is a war for peace'. You may even have found yourself shouting out 'be quiet'.

Teaching is often based on modeling the desired behaviour and so it is important that we are clear and consistent in the way we do things. This goes beyond what we say and includes how we say it, after all if you want children to respect themselves and others you have to show them respect. Interrupting them when they are talking, and shouting orders at them will not be read as it is okay for teachers to shout but not students. They will adopt your ways. Equally if you do not want them to be violent, you should avoid using aggressive methods.

Learning new ways of behaving takes time and requires practice. You need to be patient and give the students the opportunity to learn and internalise the new ways, offering praise whenever they get it right.

The students will look to you to be fair and consistent. When you tell them to do something such as to look at you when you are talking, do not begin talking until all of them are paying attention. In this way you will reinforce what you are saying.

The Noisy Class

The days of total silence in the classroom seem to have almost disappeared. The learning activities that students engage in are, in most cases, organised in such a way that discussion is an important feature and will enhance the understanding of the concept being taught. Discussions may range from the teacher addressing the whole class, to small groups working on a problem together. The framework of the discussions will be one of questioning and answering. For example, you may explain how a plant uses sunlight to produce nutrients, and then question students on the details to test their understanding. Alternatively, you may ask students to investigate something and they will try to identify the questions they need to ask in order to find out something new. In both these cases, the focus of the discussion will be the work that you have set. Successful outcomes will be achieved if the students understand what is expected of them and how they should behave.

When the discussion wanders you will need to be in control so that you can bring the students back onto the task quickly, quietly and authoritatively. The degree of control that you can exercise will depend upon a number of things. These will include:

- A clear agreement of how students should behave in the class.

- A respect for you and what you are trying to teach.
- Your willingness to assume the directorial role and exert your will when required.

A well-organised class will exhibit these characteristics and provide a good learning environment. As students begin to divert their attention from the task, you will be able to bring them back from their gossip and chit-chat in a smooth, friendly but firm way.

There is a range of strategies for some typical situations where talking becomes the barrier to learning. These strategies are not designed to eliminate noise totally from the class because that may be adverse to the mode of learning. If the students feel that the classroom atmosphere is oppressive they may not willingly want to enter into any discussion about the work, so the emphasis is on you having sufficient control to ensure your students are enthusiastic and remain on task, but do not obstruct others with the noise they make.

The key to an industrious class, where there is a buzz of student activity, properly focused and producing the desired outcomes is that everyone has a clear understanding of how to behave. The students and teacher need to know what is required and be aware of the rights and responsibilities of each person in the room. Tactical avoidance of disruptions in the class is your best strategy and the suggestions that follow will include some ideas on how to plan your lessons in ways that will minimise disruptions.

Chatting while the teacher is explaining something

You need to explain a concept or a process, which requires you to talk to the whole class for an extended period of time. The exposition will be followed by some consolidation work where the class will apply the information you give them to a number of problems. Your talk will introduce new ideas and knowledge to the class, and you are expecting them to grasp the main points during it. They will be given some written information for the follow-up work but the emphasis will be on listening to you carefully. During this time some students begin chatting and making comments that cause the flow of your lesson to stop.

Your strategy

This is a common problem for many teachers. The chattering will have already broken the concentration of those involved and the students sitting near to them. The aim at this point is to minimise the disturbance and to get the whole class back on task, which is to give you their full attention. Therefore your action should be one of not adding to the disruption, and more importantly, it should not cause any secondary behaviour that you will have to deal with. The best approach is to have in your mind a plan for dealing with these kinds of interruptions that begin with the least obtrusive approach and moves progressively through a repertoire of strategies depending on the situation.

Your approach

During your exposition you should try to assume an authoritative air and have presence. Speak clearly and casually scan the room emphasising certain points to different groups of student. This will keep their attention. If students do begin to chat you should get their attention by looking straight at them. Direct eye contact is extremely effective so once you have it use a sign like holding one finger over your lips showing that you would like them to be quiet. As soon as the student gets the message, turn your attention away to another group of students and quickly resume your exposition. After a few seconds return to them and if the talking has stopped you can make another sign indicating to them that you have appreciated their response. Your stance and posture will communicate a lot to the class so during the lesson appear relaxed, open and animated. Smile frequently, especially when you need to redirect a student in the way described above.

Sometimes this approach will not be successful and the chatter may resume. If it is from a different student then the same method can be used, but if the same student begins talking again you may need to try a verbal approach. You will need to be more assertive to ensure your own right to teach is reinforced. Assertive behaviour need not be aggressive or threatening, simply decisive and confident, in a pleasant and friendly way. The tone of your voice will signal to the student that you are not angry but wish them to respond to your request because you are in charge of the situation. The kind of request you can make will be related to your right to teach and the right of the rest of the class to be taught. For example:

T I am talking and want you to listen, please.

This is a clear instruction directed at the individual student. You state what is happening in the class and what you expect the student to be doing. You put it politely and follow up with 'please' pausing momentarily, then turn your attention away with the expectation that he or she will follow your instructions.

Although you had to break the flow of your lesson the interruption is minimised and you can return immediately to it. As before, if your request is successful you should make known your gratitude to the student using a sign and a smile. There will be persistent chatter in most classes and so you may find yourself having to resort to strategies quite often especially if the students are finding it difficult to stay interested.

Plan ahead

The best way of avoiding such situations is to plan in advance. Students will often have difficulty sitting passively for a long period of time when surrounded by their friends. The skill of the teacher is in holding the attention of the whole class by making the lesson sufficiently interesting. The information may be extremely 'dry' but in the hands of an enthusiastic teacher it can be brought alive. You need to regard your delivery of the lesson as a performance that will captivate, entertain and motivate your students to want to know more.

The length of the exposition will have a significant influence on the students. Most people's attention spans are limited, but they can be extended by change and variety. Careful consideration of what you really need to deliver in a didactic way will help you to keep the exposition to an acceptable length.

Arrangement of the classroom

The arrangement of the room will also be a contributory factor in holding students' attention. You will want every student to have a clear view of you during the lesson. The seating needs to be organised to ensure this, which will also mean you will be able to have a clear view of the students. They should be facing you and not need to turn their head to see. Comfort plays a large part in this. Students who cannot see or hear clearly will fidget and eventually be distracted. Try to clear the room of unnecessary furniture and equipment and lay out the chairs allowing good access and individual space. Identify in advance a place for coats and bags, and open the windows to enable a movement of fresh air without freezing the students, or causing draughts that will rattle blinds and blow papers around.

Talking while students are presenting their work

You have arranged for the students to present their work to each other during the lesson. Each student will be required to stand at the front of the class and be given a set time period in which to explain their work. The other students will then ask questions for a further set time period. All students will be assessed for both their own presentation and their involvement in the presentations of the others. During one of the presentations several students begin to talk to each other which distracts the students presenting their work.

Your strategy

You can try the approaches suggested in the previous example first. Use non-verbal signs to indicate to the students that you want them to stop talking, remembering to engage in direct-eye contact and then look away as soon as they have got your message to allow take-up time. If they persist you will have to use verbal methods.

Your approach

Begin by gaining the attention of the student presenting and say politely:

T Excuse me, Martin, could you pause for a moment please?

Then turn to the students who were talking. They will probably have stopped at this point

and be waiting to see why you have intervened. You should engage their attention and give them an explicit direction.

T Anisha and Jane, I would like you to stop talking please.

You do not need to appear angry, do it in an assertive and polite way. Be firm and direct and as soon as you have made this request, turn to the student presenting, smile to put them at ease, apologize for the interruption and ask them to continue.

The use of positive directions such as, 'I want you to...' are less confrontational and let the students know what is required of them. They allow for a quick solution to take place so that the activity can be resumed. Negative statements such as, 'Don't talk while Martin is presenting', are best saved for situations which may be harmful when you need a quick response. In the example above they seem overbearing and are impersonal. They say nothing about your feelings and sound aggressive. Most students do not deliberately want to offend so they will accommodate your request. If you phrase your request as a question:

T Would you like it if someone interrupted your presentation?

This simply invites a reply which will not resolve the problem. You have had to stop the presentation and now you will find yourself in a discussion with the student who caused the interruption. Your question will trigger secondary behaviour because it allows the student to make a comment on the work. A likely reply may be:

S I wouldn't mind, it's a stupid lesson anyway.

Now how will you get out of that? The question has not clearly indicated what you want the student to do, nor has it resolved the interruption, instead it has sown a seed in the minds of some students that your activity may not be useful (even though it is). The situation has worsened to the point where you will have to skillfully redirect the whole class back onto the task which may not prove easy. So steer clear of questions in such situations and keep to direct requests.

Targeting your request by beginning with the name of the student ensures they know you are talking to them. Always use first names and keep it friendly, after all it is only a small interruption and does not warrant a loss of temper or the use of stern or harsh attitudes. Save those for when they are really needed.

Plan ahead

You could minimise interruptions by planning. Give the students a task during the presentation such as formulating questions, noting the key points and preparing for the discussion. Brief them that their behaviour during the lesson is being observed and assessed, in particular their ability to listen attentively (a valued skill). If you have students who you know will be tempted to start talking or distracting others, give them a special task to do during the presentation part like being the official timekeeper. You will need to be clever in how you make this request. Explain that public speaking is a skill and needs to be succinct and not ramble so keeping to time is one of the most important aspects of it. Tell the class that you will need someone who can carry out the task

accurately and fairly while still listening attentively to the speaker. You may get a number of volunteers depending on the age range, but you need to deliberate long enough to show that you have just made the decision of selecting your target student - possibly the troublesome one.

Run through the protocol for presentations before you begin. These will include turn-taking where only one person can talk at once and that will be the student doing the presentation. During the discussions use a signal like hands-up, for students wishing to speak. Stress to students that they should respect others and remain silent during the presentation as they will want to be treated in the same way.

Continuing to talk

If distracting behaviour occurs and the students do not respond to your request for quiet you will have to inform them of the consequences of their action. This may be that they will not be allowed to present their work, therefore they will not be assessed. If they have already presented then you can remind them that it is a two-way process and the assessment includes their ability to be a member of the audience and act appropriately.

Oral questioning with the whole class

You are teaching the whole class and every so often you check their understanding by asking them questions. However, a small number of students always seem to know the answer before the others and one or two call out the answer before you ask them to. This results in many students not attempting to answer and so you are not sure whether they have understood the work. How should you handle this situation?

Your strategy

This is a fairly common problem and it needs to be handled extremely sensitively. The students who are eager to answer your questions are keen and want to be noticed. They are looking for your attention and when allowed to give an answer will be hoping for your praise if they are correct. Such enthusiasm is valuable in a class and needs to be cultivated and maintained because it will be contagious and spread to the others if treated in the right way. It is important to let the rest of the students have a go at answering your questions as well, because although they may be slower to respond they may still be as keen as the ones calling out. Some students may be reluctant to speak out because they lack confidence and could be unsure of their answers. You will get to know your class and be aware of each student's ability. You will know which students are very able but do not like to show it, which ones have difficulty grasping the ideas and will not have an answer, and the students who are generally less confident about themselves. This knowledge of

your class is invaluable and will help you bring out the best in each student.

The questioning of the class had a purpose in this scenario, it was to establish the general level of understanding. Therefore you do need to ensure that you achieve this by conducting the questioning in a way that brings in as many students as possible. The most obvious way is to direct your attention to a specific student by addressing him by name first, followed by the question:

T Peter, can you tell me one thing that plants require to synthesise food?

Only Peter is being asked to respond and if he gives a satisfactory reply you can move on to the next question, directing it at another named student. In this way you can make sure that you find out specific things from each student which will give you an idea of their level of understanding.

Reminding about the rules

Other students will be tempted to give you the answer despite the fact that you have named someone else. If they call out before you invite them to speak you should ask them to signal that they want to contribute by raising a hand or using a similar sign.

T It is nice to see you are keen, Michael, but it is not your turn. If you know the answer raise your hand and I will come to you.

You begin on a positive note, complimenting the student on his interest. You named him to avoid any confusion. You explained that turn-taking is being employed, and given clear instructions of what the student should do if he has the answer. You should not tell them off for interrupting by using 'don't' because it gives a negative signal to them which may cause bad feeling. What you are doing is expressing your pleasure in their enthusiasm while helping them to learn the right way to behave in the situation. When you ask a question and a student puts up his hand you go to him and begin by thanking him e.g.

T Thank you, Michael, for raising your hand, I can see you would like to answer, go ahead.

This approach will reinforce the behaviour you are looking for and provide a positive feel to the lesson. If the student calls out again later in the lesson ignore him and move to someone with his hand raised and take his answer. You could begin with an acknowledgement that he observed the hands-up rule.

T Neil, you have raised your hand, would you like to give us your answer please?

The other students are being reminded of the class rule in an unobtrusive and non-threatening way. They will also see that the right behaviour is rewarded as the student is allowed to give his answer. The subtle reminder of a rule until all the class have internalised it is the best approach.

Establishing ground rules

Preventative action will again be the most effective strategy. You should discuss how the class needs to behave in this kind of learning activity at the start of the course. Get them to agree a set of class rules, then at the beginning of the lesson you can remind them of turn-taking and the hands-up rule. If a student does call out, you should remind them in a firm but polite way using positive 'do' instructions, in favour of negative 'don't's'.

T John, we have a class rule for calling out, please use it.

or:

T Elaine, if you have the answer, raise your hand please.

You are naming the students to make sure they know who you are addressing and then you are clearly stating how they should act in this situation. A cheerful tone accompanied by a smile tells them you are not angry. You should not dwell on this but look from them to someone who has raised their hand and let them answer, showing them how it should be done and minimising the disruption. The movement of attention to another student prevents them from being embarrassed which may lead to a bad feeling that will cause secondary behaviour later in the lesson.

Summary

A class that generates noise is not necessarily a badly behaved one, it is not even a badly managed one. Discussions do need to be organised to avoid excessive volume and the students should be aware of when they should give you their full attention so that you can teach and give instructions.



This article is an excerpt from the book
Managing Behaviour In the Classroom

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This article offers ideas about what to do to handle interruptions from students during a lesson. Other noisy classroom scenarios are also covered in the book, which discusses situations grouped into six areas: * the noisy class * time-wasters and off-task students * conflicts and dramas * incidents beyond the classroom * distractions * relationships with colleagues and students. The author provides a wealth of ideas on approaches and strategies, which can be applied to unforeseen situations.