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ABSTRACT

Addressing the problem of children being emotionally abusive to each other in the form of heckling and the more serious "put-down," this paper suggests that this behavior can stem from a need for attention, resistance, an inability to express feelings more appropriately, or a desire to test an adult's strength. It is important to listen to children and understand why they are doing something before punishing them, and this paper discusses the need for and use of limits in the classroom. Role play can be a good device for teaching students how to respond effectively, rather than weakly, to a heckler. Techniques include standing tall, looking directly into the eyes of the person you're saying "no" to, and using a firm voice. The paper offers samples of other activities to do with children that promote their thinking about how they feel and how their actions affect themselves and others. Children need more help dealing with put-downs than with heckles, and adults should step in to identify the interaction as a put-down and to stop it. Class discussion, respectful teacher behavior, and provision of a haven in the classroom for angry or upset children are offered as ways to promote appropriate behavior. The paper concludes with findings from Educators for Social Responsibility on dealing with aggressive students, and a list of 11 basic concepts to remember when dealing with negative classroom behavior. (EV)

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"Teacher! Make them stop!"

by

Anne Read Smith

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"Larry. . . . Larry, I don't like that. . . . L-a-r-r-y, please stop. . . . **Teacher!!!!**

Larry's bothering me. Make him stop!"

Just about everyone from parents to store clerks to politicians has had the experience of both heckling and being heckled. One reason it is hard to get children to stop heckling or annoying others is that it is so much fun—for the heckler. But it is bothersome and often is an attempt to invade someone else's physical or personal space. Heckling can stem from a need for attention, resistance, or an inability to express feelings more appropriately. It also can be a way of testing an adult's strength. While these reasons are not excuses, examining them can help you understand why this behavior persists despite your efforts.

Each child needs to feel that he or she is loved, respected and valued for who they are as individuals. This acceptance and caring is crucial if we are going to help children change how they feel about themselves and/or change their behavior. Children need an environment that's safe enough so they can try out new things, take risks, make mistakes, learn from their mistakes and feel good about what they've done. It's important to listen to children and understand why they are doing something before you begin to reprimand and/or punish them.

Trust and respect are the first building blocks needed to develop a safe environment. Also needed are a few clear limits and relevant consequences, which are immediately enforced if limits are overstepped. Two opposite needs that influence your ability to enforce limits are the need to be liked and the need to have control. It is important you examine how you personally feel about limits, which side you lean toward, and then use this self-knowledge to work toward a balance between the two.

Some children look on limits as a challenge to see what will happen if they go beyond the established boundaries. Does someone care enough about them to stop their behavior? When you encounter such children, your first instinct may be to clobber them with a two-by-four. But these children especially need a safe, caring environment with a few, clear limits and immediate consequences that they can respect. You will get well acquainted with these students, because they need a lot of limit setting, respect, support, caring, and appreciation. These children can be very demanding, but they also can be extremely rewarding to work with.

If students have input into making the rules and setting up the consequences, they have a feeling of control and power over their situation. A classroom with no clear limits is like an intersection where the stoplights have failed. Some drivers bully their way through, while others hold back, waiting and hoping for a break in traffic. My first experience teaching 9-,10- and 11-year olds was like this. The children were verbally and/or physically mean to themselves, to me, and to each other. They bothered others and laughed at the discomfort they caused. They made snide remarks just loud enough to be overheard. No child had the strength to object when his or her privacy was invaded. We all learned a great deal that year.

As a teacher you will probably encounter as many different types of behavior as you have children. This is one of the surprises of our profession and what keeps things interesting! It is easy to recognize that you need to take action to stop harmful behavior and provide consequences when children are fighting or being disruptive. In a classroom which supports children's self-esteem, however, the emphasis is on emotional as well as physical safety and this means you have to encourage your students to accept their own feelings, refrain from emotionally abusive behavior and channel them into more acceptable actions. The two most prevalent kinds of behavior that fall into the emotionally abusive category I call "heckles" and "put-downs."

I define heckling as annoying or bothersome behavior. Put downs are more serious; actions or words that try to cause someone to feel bad about themselves. "Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me" was a chant used to taunt children as I was growing up. That chant is completely untrue because words do hurt, the pain sometimes lasts a lifetime.

A first step in changing behavior is to help children look at different ways they can undermine themselves when they say no, such as: using a whining voice; using a soft voice so the other person can't hear; looking down at the ground as if apologizing; acting helpless; playing "poor me" by expecting the other person not to respect your response; standing with slumped shoulders; acting like a cry-baby; and/or trying to bribe the person into stopping with offers of friendship or gifts. Combining one or more of these techniques will make it even less likely that you will get someone to stop.

Roleplay is an effective device for teaching new behaviors, such as saying "no"

to being heckled. It is especially critical for children to have the experience of role-playing both the heckler as well as the one who says no to the heckler. To start the role-play the person being heckled first tries to stop it in an ineffective way, such as, talking in a soft or whiny voice and not looking at the heckler. Repeat the exercise—only this time the same person being heckled stops the heckling in an effective way by speaking with a firm, strong voice and looking directly at the heckler. It is very important to experience the contrast between these two positions of being effective and not effective. Then have the children change roles, the heckler becomes the person being heckled. Again, it is extremely important to experience the contrast between hearing an ineffective and an effective “no.”

Some responses from children who have had this experience:

Lamoya: I loved heckling Rosa when she was doing the part where she couldn't stop me. I didn't know heckling could be so much fun.

Jomo: I didn't like it when Bobby wouldn't stop heckling me. It didn't matter that I wasn't looking at him. I wanted him to stop. I felt like hitting him when he didn't.

This entire process helps children understand how others might feel and to develop tools for dealing with their differences. Often by hearing others say no, shy children are more able to say no when they are being bothered by someone. Also having the experience of saying no in a safe, contrived circumstance gives them a pattern to fall back on in a real-life situation, when they need to say no to someone who is bothering them.

Frequently the experience of being heckled and not being immediately able to stop it is an eye opener for children who tend to be bullies. It does not always

eliminate their bullying behavior, but it does give them an opportunity for insight into how it feels. When a shy child can deliver a direct and firm no, a bully—even one who has not shared the group role-playing experience—often responds by stopping. What an empowering feeling for a shy child.

Jane Stern, a former principal in the Vallejo (California) Unified School District, has written an excellent program to help children develop the social skill of saying “no.” There are three, very easy techniques to help a child’s “no” be heard:

- Stand tall with knees loose. Sense power coming up from the earth and use it.
- Look directly into the eyes of the person you’re saying no to.
- Use a firm, strong voice when you speak.

Positive strategies children can use to support themselves when they say “no,” include bringing along a supportive friend; meaning what you say and not just asking for attention; expecting the person to stop when you say “stop”; feeling you are worthwhile; and/or being aware of your own self-respect.

Besides role play, the following are samples of things to do with children that promote their thinking about how they feel and how their actions affect themselves and someone else, which in turn promotes a realistic self-esteem. The subjects for art, writing or discussion are limitless.

1. Encourage children to give and receive authentic credit on a regular basis.
2. Art Projects:

Draw with your eyes closed and unaccustomed hand. Use only one large crayon held in the fist. This gives a “feeling” picture.

Draw pictures of a classroom without rules. Discuss the consequences.

Draw pictures of what children would like to do to someone who is mean to them.

Draw pictures of what children like and don't like that happens to them.

After finishing any art project, discuss the pictures and the feelings with the total group.

3. Writing Projects: For each writing assignment, be sure to include the instructions "what you like and don't like and why you feel that way."

Breaking rules.

Being teased or teasing someone else.

Food fights in the cafeteria.

4. Have group discussions about different ways to solve the problems that come up in the group.
5. Use a "Complaint Box"
6. Have celebrations.
7. Give appreciation.
8. Find positive ways children can interact with each other.
9. Read books to the group, such as "Wendy and the Bullies" and "The Meanest Thing To Say." Discuss, draw pictures and/or act out parts of the book.

As professionals working with school-age children, you are asked to help them learn many things. It seems to me that a necessary first step is to help children say "no" or "stop it" when another person does something that bothers them. Once you

teach children effective skills for standing up for themselves and setting their own limits, they can then later apply these skills to other issues like getting in a stranger's car, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, or dealing with peer pressure.

Children need a lot more help to deal with put-downs than with heckles. They need help from adults to identify and to stop the put-down. Often children will feel responsible when someone else puts them down. They feel as if they have earned or deserve the put down. This is why it is terribly important for adults to immediately step in, label the interaction as a put-down, and enforce the appropriate consequence. Once children become adept at stopping heckles, their confidence will increase and they can move on to dealing with put-downs.

Put downs are real killers of self-esteem. They can be words or actions that hurt. They are demeaning or derogatory. Often put-downs take the form of laughter when someone has made a mistake. Put-downs can be very subtle. Children will not always recognize a put down until much later. This is why it's important for the adult in charge to step in when he or she hears or sees a put down, label the behavior or action and stop it.

Of course, put-downs are most harmful to the person receiving them, but in general this kind of negative interaction is not helpful for anyone. In an atmosphere where teasing, snide remarks, and sarcasm are acceptable, no one can feel safe, free to take risks, or let their honest feelings show.

The most common put-downs occur when someone makes a mistake and others laugh. A group discussion about put-downs is valuable because children can begin to see that they are not the only ones who have been made fun of and feel put-down. Everyone has feelings of getting scared, lonely, angry, or upset. These

emotions are normal and important to acknowledge. How children handle their feelings is critical. Talking about how they feel helps them become clearer about themselves. Hearing others say they don't like to be put-down helps children begin to say to themselves, "Hey, I don't like that either. If Johnny can get people to stop putting him down, maybe I can too."

You are a role model, teaching by what you do and not what you say but how you say it. If you want to stop sarcasm, hurtful teasing and put downs in your children, first eliminate them from your vocabulary.

In wanting to build up a child's self-esteem, adults often give inauthentic praise or feedback, saying something is wonderful, wonderful when it's not. This actually undermines a child's self-esteem. Children know when you're lying to them. Also, it means they aren't going to believe you when you give them authentic praise.

When children feel safe, respected, and cared for, they know the limits will protect them no matter what their mood. When children are happy they usually don't need anything special from you, other than your acknowledgment of their happiness and your pleasure about how they are feeling. If they are feeling angry or being disruptive, it is important to have a special area where they can go to take appropriate care of themselves. These alternatives must be supportive rather than punitive so that the children do not feel ridiculed. For example, you might have pillows, blankets, and stuffed animals in one area. If a child is unhappy and wants some privacy, you can invite him or her to curl up in a soft chair, holding a pillow or stuffed animal for comfort. If an angry child is upset, you can offer large crayons and newsprint with the instruction to scribble hard and long with permission to tear

the paper if they scribble that hard.

Recent research points the way to help schools deal with aggressive kids and violence. Here are some of the findings put together by Educators for Social Responsibility followed by suggestions for what measures teachers can take to counteract the aggression.

Aggressive kids often exhibit a narrow range of emotions and an inability to identify and express feelings. These kids tend to ignore or deny the feelings and suffering of those they hurt.

Teachers can work to develop young people's capacity for empathy. It is also important to encourage students to identify and acknowledge their own feelings and the feelings of others.

Aggressive kids are impulsive. They don't check out the facts to understand a situation and have difficulty predicting the consequences of their actions. They often blame others for their own circumstances.

Teachers can raise awareness of the costs and consequences of violence and aggression. It is important to ensure that all students have opportunities to make choices, predict the consequences of various choices, and take responsibility for their choices, both good and bad. Also encourage students to connect their "I" statements to their actions.

Aggressive kids often feel that they have no other choice but to fight or become verbally abusive. They have difficulty imagining alternative solutions, especially nonviolent ones.

Teachers can give kids opportunity to learn and practice a "toolbox" of alternative responses to conflict and violence. Encourage

thinking that affirms, "I always have choices."

Aggressive kids tend to attribute hostility to others. The more kids feel threatened, the more they perceive other people's behavior as threatening, even when it is not.

Teachers must establish a climate of safety, dignity and respect plus nurture a sense of community and belonging.

A few basic concepts to remember:

1. Build a positive relationship with each child based on trust and respect.
2. Be caring and honest or authentic in everything you say.
3. Be consistent.
4. Have a minimum of clear, well understood rules. If the children have some input into setting up the rules, they are less likely to be broken.
5. Have relevant consequences for breaking the rules.
6. If the rules are broken, enforce the consequences quickly, consistently and fairly.
7. When you reprimand a child, do it privately, honestly and in a caring way.
8. Listen, really take the time to listen to what the children say.
9. Let every one of your students know you care about them, that each one is special and there's no teacher's pet.
10. Give authentic praise and appreciation whenever possible.
11. Don't expect perfection from yourself or your students.

Neither you nor the children you work with ever needs to feel that annoying behavior is something that you are powerless over. Children who are disruptive

have a responsibility for their behavior and how it affects others. Those affected by them have a responsibility too—to set and uphold their limits. Understanding these roles provides children with important skills for not only getting along with others, but taking care of their own needs throughout their lives.



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