

A-Z of teaching young learners: Discipline

What and why?

Many teachers find that the most difficult part of their job is maintaining discipline. 'If they'd just behave, I might be able to teach them something!' is a common complaint. The first thing to consider is: do you really have a discipline problem? Many 'discipline problems' are not problems at all – it is often the teacher's reaction that makes it a problem. We cannot expect 100% attention all the time, particularly from young children – in fact we would have very good reason to be worried if children always did everything we asked them to do! When teaching young children, it is important to be flexible and patient, and to allow 'children to be children'.

In some cases, however, real discipline problems arise. There can be many reasons for this but there are three very common ones. Firstly, discipline problems are often the result of boredom. Bored children lose motivation, and demotivated children often misbehave. Secondly, discipline problems often derive from feelings of failure, and a lack of involvement, and are a way of protecting the child's own self-image. Thirdly, discipline problems are fundamentally about the relationship between the teacher and the children. If the children feel that the teacher doesn't know what he/she is doing, or is not in charge, they will often take advantage of the comparative freedom that this gives them.

Practical ideas

- Boredom is probably a lot more common than we realise. Feelings of boredom often come from a lack of personal control in the classroom when children feel they are always being told what to do. Children who take part in making real decisions about what happens in the classroom are more involved and have greater motivation, are less bored and less likely to create discipline problems.
- If you see a child who is starting to 'sink' – that is, is losing motivation through feelings of failure, try to give that child some extra personal attention – asking them how they are doing, if they found something difficult, and so on – to show that you value them.
- A particularly disruptive child is often really asking for help and attention. As far as possible, it is best to avoid getting into a negative cycle of misbehaviour – punishment – escalating misbehaviour. Personal contact with the child, listening, talking, finding out what is wrong and how you can help, is likely to be more productive.

- Discipline problems can also derive from feelings of low self-esteem. In the long term, you need to try to build up the child's feelings of success by giving them things that you know they can do. In the short term, you can raise self-esteem by giving a disruptive child special privileged responsibilities, such as collecting in the work, checking that everyone has everything they need, returning equipment to its place, and so on.
- When discipline problems continually recur in the class, it is usually fruitful to involve the children in suggesting how things can be improved. For example, it is probably better to say 'Our group work isn't working. What can we do about it?' than to say 'Stop messing around! The next person who does that...'
- The key to a balanced, happy working environment is a positive relationship between the children and the teacher, and the feeling that both parties are working in the same direction. Many teachers involve the children in drawing up a 'code of conduct' for their classroom, or 'rules for our groupwork', which the children themselves can suggest. When things break down, this then puts the teacher in a less confrontational role with the children.
- Young children, however, do need to feel that the teacher is 'in charge'. Few, if any, children are 'bad'. Children are in the process of finding themselves, of shaping their relations with others, and of experimenting with their behaviour. They need, therefore, to discover the limits of acceptable behaviour. A good teacher is one who is firm but not inflexible, who expects the children to be well-behaved and who signals that serious misbehaviour won't be tolerated, and explains why.
- Discipline problems can also occur because of the energy levels of the children. Sitting at a desk for long periods of time often produces restlessness. You may find it useful to start a lesson with some physical activity (such as a 'Simon says' game – see page T81 in the Teacher's Book) to release the energy levels that the children have. Alternatively they may be feeling tired and unable to concentrate, in which case it will probably be impossible to get them to do any real 'work'. The important thing is to judge each situation as it occurs and to take a flexible approach.
- Punishing children should be considered the last resort. Punishment rarely makes things better, and often makes them a lot worse. More can usually be achieved by explaining why certain actions are not acceptable and by building an agreement with the child about how the situation can be improved. If a child becomes so disruptive that he/she is disturbing the others, then it is probably better to withdraw that child for the sake of the class, but the general direction to take must be in encouraging the child to regulate his or her own behaviour.