

Teen angst

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Establishing and maintaining discipline in the classroom.

Background

Teaching teenagers can be a frustrating and stressful experience. They tend to be less motivated than other age groups, they can have a low 'world' awareness and can be unpredictable. Often they don't want to be in class. However, they can also be the most rewarding, fun and liveliest students you'll ever teach.

Effective teachers are those who can prevent problems from occurring in the first place and know what to do and feel confident when trouble starts. Following a few rules can help.

Preventing discipline problems

- Be friendly but firm. Always start by being firm, you can relax later
- Establish the rules and stick to them. From the first lesson make it clear to the students what is and isn't permissible. This can be done either as a negotiated classroom contract or as a list of rules laid down by you and the school. The latter is more effective if you think a contract will not be taken seriously by the students. Remember to treat the students consistently and fairly.
- Know the disciplinary procedure. Find out what steps can be taken if you have a problem and make it clear to the students as well. If you don't have a discipline procedure at your school, suggest one. It will give you confidence to deal with problems effectively.
- Put in the time to prepare motivating, fun lessons. Take into account the students' likes and dislikes. Ensure that you provide the right level of challenge. Too easy and they will become bored and disruptive, too difficult and they will feel de-motivated, switch off and become disruptive.
- Keep a snappy pace in your lessons. Allowing activities to drag on for too long will result in boredom. Change the focus and pace of the lesson regularly. Also, be aware of what is happening in your classroom. Keep your eyes and your ears open to all parts of the room. Personal contact will encourage the students to participate in the lesson and will give you an idea of how the lesson is going. Look out for signs of lost interest or distraction.
- Treat them like adults (don't patronise them), but don't forget that they are still children. Teenagers often respond well to being treated as older than they are. It is often how they wish to be perceived. Remember though that they can still get carried away very easily.

- Don't forget to highlight good work and praise the positive things in your students. All too often most of the attention is given to the students who misbehave.

If a problem occurs

- Know what you are going to do before the trouble really starts. This will give you the confidence to deal effectively with difficult situations and will prevent them from getting any worse. It will help you remain calm, because you know where the situation is heading. React quickly and firmly.
- Don't issue empty threats. If you threaten a student with disciplinary action, you must follow through exactly what you promised. If not, you will lose their respect and create more problems for later.
- Remain calm and avoid personal confrontation. It is extremely difficult at times to maintain calmness in the face of aggression or rudeness. Remember though you need to take the heat out of the situation. Losing your temper or shouting at a student will simply make you weaker. You can't win a battle with a student face to face in the class you will lose your authority in front of the students. Talking to a student in one to one situation after the lesson will put you in control again and will leave them with something to think about during the lesson.

A few things to remember

- If anything does occur in the classroom, don't take it personally. Remember that most of the time it is not directed at you. Like the disgruntled guest shouting at the receptionist in the hotel, you represent not only the school but also the teaching establishment. The students may have had bad experiences in the past and you are the nearest target.
- I have always found teaching teenagers the most rewarding part of my job. The enthusiasm and energy that can be harnessed from a class of teenagers can make for a wonderful experience.