

## Chapter 6

# Problems with Authority Figures

Teaching students who test the limits of what they are allowed to do in class is nothing new for you. However, Troy is one of the more challenging students you have taught. He repeatedly pushes the boundaries, and he rarely responds to your redirections in a way that shows respect for you as an adult.

Moreover, when you reinforce class structure or remind him of the rules, Troy ignores you or replies with sarcastic comments. Sometimes, after you ask him to stop a disruptive behavior, he engages in the same behavior just a few minutes later. When you become visibly frustrated by his acting out, he does not seem to have any reaction. Sometimes it even feels like he is encouraged by your frustration. His peers laugh at some of his jokes and surprising behaviors, but many students seem hesitant to become friends with Troy. You have even noticed that when he thinks you are not looking, he sometimes encourages other students to misbehave. It feels like he is competing with you for control of the classroom. How exhausting and distracting!

You have sent Troy to the principal's office several times this year, for such things as speaking disrespectfully to you in front of the class, tipping over his desk when you asked him to clean it, and refusing to leave the room during a fire drill. Troy questions the rules, challenging that his desk is "clean enough," even though it is clearly a mess compared with those of other students. When he refused to leave during a fire drill, he complained that it was pointless to exit the room when there was not a real fire.

You know that your rules and requests are reasonable. Nevertheless, Troy frequently questions your authority, as though apply-

ing basic structure in the classroom were arbitrary or oppressive. On the surface, Troy does not appear to have clear reasons for his rule-breaking and authority-challenging behaviors. You have explained the reasons behind the rules, but he shows little interest in trying to see things from anyone else's perspective. The possibility of consequences, such as going to the principal's office, has little impact on him. You worry that his defiant attitudes will become worse as he gets older, making both academics and friendships more difficult for him.

## WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE

- Frequently breaks rules or does not follow directions
- Tests limits by seeing what he can get away with before being redirected
- Displays limited regret for disruptive behaviors
- Appears indifferent to the distress adults may show when repeatedly trying to help him follow rules
- May try to get a rise out of adults by not cooperating with them
- Openly questions rules or directions
- Ignores, argues, or laughs when prompted or reprimanded
- Seeks attention from peers by making disruptive comments and jokes during class or by taking on a role as class clown
- May have difficulty establishing close friendships, or gravitates toward other students who act defiantly
- Grades suffer because of limited motivation to achieve good grades or difficulty adhering to assignments and classroom expectations

## DESCRIPTION OF PROBLEMS

As with many childhood problems, difficulty respecting the authority of adults and showing disregard for rules and class norms may result from a combination of factors. Contributing factors may include difficulty trusting adults, limited opportunities to see or experience the benefits of following rules, a belief that negative attention is easier to acquire than positive attention, underdeveloped social skills related to making needs known and seeking out assistance in appropriate ways, exposure to inconsistent or overly punitive discipline styles, or feelings of anger and resentment toward people in positions of power.

Because this type of behavior seems to cause the individual and those around him tremendous problems, it can be difficult to remember that all behavior is learned because it is (or was) effective in some situations. And, just as behavior is learned over time, it changes over time. Problems with authority and rules can be particularly slow to change because other, more useful skills may not have been developed to fall back on.

Problems with authority can be associated with aggressive behavior, emotional distress, poor academic and social adjustment, future problems with the legal system, and future employment difficulties.

## Recommendations

### CLASSROOM STRUCTURE

#### Ask Yourself

Is it what the student is saying or how is saying it that challenges the rules and your role as teacher?

What are three specific behaviors that the student would benefit from changing?

What is this student doing well?

- *Behaviors may get worse (before they get better):* When a pattern of behavior is challenged by a change in the rewards and consequences that existed previously, a child or adolescent often tries harder to get the same results as before. For example, if the student feels as though he is receiving less attention for questioning class rules and is receiving more consistent consequences without debate, the student may initially increase his attempts to debate you. However, after a period of time, the student will recognize that he cannot entice you into debate, will learn to predict the consequences, and will decrease these disruptive behaviors.
- *Experiment with seating:* Although it is important to have a student sit in a place where his behaviors can be easily observed, some students who are placed in the front-center of the room use the opportunity to impress an audience of classmates by further challenging the teacher. Some defiant students will act out less frequently if they are placed a few rows back or to the side of the room, where they feel less stimulated.
- *Watch for disruptive subgroups:* A student may join in with the negative behaviors of peers or actively attempt to pull others into his or her negative behaviors. Be proactive if you think this is happening—as needed, help to buffer between students by asking them to sit apart from each other or keeping them occupied with productive activities. It may be helpful to explain that this is not a punishment but, instead, a way to help them each focus on class material.

- *Do not give in:* Do not give in to demands to give special privileges before the student meets your expectation. Have the student perform the expectation first. It may be frustrating to maintain consistency with a persistent student, but this way the student knows just what to expect from you and what you expect from him.
- *Praise the small steps:* When the student's behavior is positive, provide plenty of praise. Positive changes may be small at first. However, noticing the small improvements and helping the student build on them is the best way to create more substantial and lasting change.
- *Pay attention to the positive:* When the student is exhibiting both positive and negative behaviors, do not focus exclusively on correcting mistakes. Make redirections as needed, but also let the student know that you noticed appropriate behaviors. For instance, a child who often speaks out of turn may raise his hand to ask a question about an assignment but then become argumentative when he learns the assignment will be more difficult than expected. Praising the student for raising his hand, while also redirecting the argumentative tone, will help teach him how to differentiate appropriate from disruptive behaviors.
- *Set the limit and move on:* When addressing an individual, state your expectation for students' behavior and the rationale behind this expectation clearly, then move on to your next task (e.g., "Rebecca, you need to stop making noise during class because it distracts other students from listening. If you want to discuss this further, we can do so after class. Travis, can you please read the next passage?"). Avoid getting into lengthy explanations with the student in the midst of your lesson.
- *Timing:* If a student challenges you inappropriately (e.g., by raising his voice or speaking in a disrespectful tone), remind the student that you can only discuss his concerns when he is maintaining respectful behavior. Help the student use appropriate communication skills first, then address his or her concerns. Addressing the content of the student's concerns before he is calm and respectful may reinforce the student's behavior. An agitated student is also unlikely to absorb what you are saying to him.
- *Praise students who are not defiant:* Praising cooperative students not only provides those children with helpful encouragement but also sets an example for students with greater tendencies toward challenging authority.

#### Keep in Mind

- Target a small number of specific behaviors when helping the student learn more effective classroom behavior.
- Providing redirection that isolates these specific behaviors ("You need to lower your voice when speaking to an adult, and you need to address me by saying,

'Excuse me, Ms. Thompson'—not by saying, 'Hey!'") is often more helpful than general comments ("You need to change your attitude").

## COLLABORATING WITH STUDENTS

### Ask Yourself

What choices or opportunities can I offer to this student that will engage him in a constructive way?

- *Engage the student:* Look for ways to enlist the student as a positive helper, or provide a role during activities that gives the student a sense of purpose in the classroom (other than as class clown or as cocaptain of the classroom).
- *Respect the need to save face:* When a more intensive discussion about the student's behavior is needed, try not to address him in front of other students. This will model respectful interactions and remove the influence of an audience. Avoid excessive joking or sarcasm because the student may misperceive this as ridicule.
- *Provide opportunities for control:* Allow the student to exercise control in age-appropriate and prosocial ways. For example, offer choices of activities that are all equally acceptable for class or choices for rewards when the student meets classroom expectations for a period of time. Remember that children who try too hard to control people or situations in their environment sometimes do so because they actually feel out of control inside.
- *Motivate the student:* Find out what motivates the student, and present your requests in terms of reaching personal goals rather than simply doing an activity for you or because it is assigned. If a child sees a request as being in his own best interests, he is more likely to follow through.
- *Use positive goals:* When possible, encourage the student to move toward something rewarding rather than away from something unpleasant. Instead of saying, "Remember that you have to do this or you'll get lunch detention again," try, "I know you're working hard to be able to eat lunch with your friends all next week, so keep trying to do this." When a student believes he is moving toward something positive, the student is more likely to feel motivated.
- *Stay flexible in your approach:* Of course, you may sometimes need to speak sternly or firmly to a student about his or her behavior. However, it is important not to overuse this tone with the child. When the tense moments are over, return to the calm, relaxed tone you might use to speak with any student.

### Keep in Mind

- Model the communication styles you want the students to use. Sometimes, children have not been exposed to effective ways of expressing themselves, and they learn from your example.

## COLLABORATING WITH THE FAMILY/CAREGIVERS

**Ask Yourself**

How do the student's authority-challenging statements and behaviors impede his or her learning in class?

Have the parents received feedback from other educators, or will this be new information to them?

- *Call when you feel calm:* We all know how frustrating and upsetting it can be when a child repeatedly acts rude or defiant when you are trying to teach the child and help him grow. However, if you need to call home, parents may be most receptive to your concerns if they perceive that your approach is calm and thoughtful. If you feel upset but need to call the student's parents, first take a 10-minute breather. You probably deserve it!
- *Do not judge character:* Keep your feedback focused on specific behaviors, and be cautious not to generalize about personality flaws. Remember that the child may feel picked on when he receives consequences for his negative behaviors, and the child may express this to his support network. Be clear with the family that you only want the best for their child and that learning to follow directions and respect legitimate authority figures will benefit the child throughout his life.
- *Remind them that it is not about you:* It can be helpful for parents to be reminded that, as an educator, part of your role is to encourage effective academic and social behaviors. You do not punish students because they offend you; rather, you direct students toward behaviors that will help them reach their goals in life.
- *Share what works:* Consider sharing with the parents the interventions that have worked or not worked in the classroom to help the student remain cooperative. Ask the parents whether they have any pointers regarding what helps their child accept directions or limits.
- *Use written communication:* Brief notes on calendars or behavior-tracking sheets help keep the parents involved and apprised of current issues in the classroom.
- *Identify strengths:* Children who present with frequent authority-challenging behaviors may often land themselves in trouble, drawing much attention to their problems. Sometimes, a child's problems seem to greatly overshadow his or her strengths. As when communicating with the child, remind the caregivers of the positive skills that the student also demonstrates.

**Keep in Mind**

- Parents sometimes benefit from encouragement, too.
- Demonstrating your concern for the student will go a long way.



## REFERRAL TO AN ADMINISTRATOR, COUNSELOR, OR MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL



### Ask Yourself

How long has the student displayed these behaviors?

How effective have classroom interventions been?

Have you noticed anything else of concern besides the challenging or defiant behaviors?

Consider such a step when

- You are aware that the child's defiant, disruptive behaviors are evident across multiple classes and settings. When a child's functioning is inhibited in multiple areas of life, more intensive intervention may be warranted.
- The student's pattern of defiance is relatively new and arose suddenly, marking a noticeable change in his attitude and demeanor.
- The child is significantly disrupting the classroom learning environment for himself and for his peers.
- The student's challenging behaviors are accompanied by mood swings, frequent crying, isolation, or aggression. Some children act out when they are experiencing mood problems because they do not have the words to express what is really bothering them.
- You feel exhausted and unsure about what will work to help the student. Sometimes, a consultation with another professional can benefit both you and the student.

### Keep in Mind

- There are often a number of reasons the student is demonstrating these behaviors in your classroom. If your interventions are not successful, do not hesitate to consult with other professionals. It is likely that the lack of response indicates the complexity and severity of the problem.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

After taking some time to evaluate where to start with Troy, you prioritize the issues you would first like to address. At the top of your list are completing assignments and not disrupting the class through inappropriate behavior or statements. As you reflect on when he refuses assignments or disrupts the class, you notice that he is often successful in pulling you into discussions or debates about the importance of the assignment or the material being presented. As a conscientious teacher, it is important to you to help students understand the relevance of the material you teach. In this case, however, Troy has discovered a way to

use your good intentions to further avoid assignments and disrupt the class. You remind yourself that this observation does not reflect any type of shortcoming as a teacher. In fact, your willingness to openly examine the process is likely a significant step toward addressing these problems.

Rather than trying to address everything at once, you decide to work on a small number of targeted changes. Being aware that Troy is likely to question assignments or material allows you to prepare brief responses to use when this occurs. You decide to respond with a brief statement of the expectation at that moment and an invitation to stay after class to discuss the purpose of the assignment if he would like to do so. Instead of telling him that he will get lunch detention if he does not begin his work, you will simply remind him that he is working toward having lunch with his friends and that you want to see him achieve his goal. You also decide to look for small changes and to provide immediate verbal praise—for example, praising his decision to start an assignment, even if he makes a negative comment about it or rolls his eyes. When he does complete an assignment, you are prepared to offer him a special role in helping you hang up holiday decorations in the hallway that day. Finally, you will make a simple weekly calendar to track his ability to complete assignments. You let Troy know that when he completes all the assignments for 1 week, you will send this calendar home with a note about his improvement. You know that this will set up the expectation for progress and help Troy envision himself succeeding.

In preparation for this new approach, you remind yourself that Troy will likely become more disruptive in the short term as he tries to get reactions or avoid assignments. You know that you will have to provide extra encouragement and praise to the other students to get through this difficult period. You also know that this kind of behavioral challenge can be exhausting, and it will be important for you to seek out support from colleagues.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the potential causes of disruptive behavior that may not be obvious at first?
2. Think of some of your more challenging students. Did you observe anything that may have kept the negative behavior going (e.g., peer reactions, avoiding work, getting a desired outcome)?
3. Have you ever seen a problem worsen when you started to intervene? Were you able to sustain your efforts long enough to see improvement? If so, how did you get through the challenging period?

*The following handout is a sample parent–teacher communication sheet that will assist in developing consistent reinforcement across home and school settings. It can be modified to suit the age of your students or the type of class you teach. Remember to include in your goal(s) both the reduction of problematic behaviors and the increase of substitute positive behaviors. Ideally, the student is included in collaboration to identify the problems and set the goals, even if his or her input is limited. Focus on observable behaviors, as opposed to internal responses that cannot be easily measured, and only choose two or three behaviors to focus on at a time.*

## Parent–Teacher Communication Sheet

Goals

To reduce (problem behaviors):

To increase (positive behaviors):

In school today \_\_\_\_\_  
(name)

Problem behavior(s)

Rarely                      Sometimes                      Often                      Very often

Rarely                      Sometimes                      Often                      Very often

Positive behavior(s)

Rarely                      Sometimes                      Often                      Very often

Rarely                      Sometimes                      Often                      Very often

Teacher comments:

What to focus on tomorrow:

Parent comments: