The Four Goals of Misbehavior

The goal of Cooperative Discipline is to maintain cooperative relationships by having students, colleagues, and parents work hand-in-hand to achieve a safe and orderly environment in which teachers can teach and students can learn. Secondly, to increase student self-esteem as they learn to behave more responsibly and achieve more academically. This resource is a brief overview of the four goals of misbehavior and some cooperative strategies to use when dealing with attention seeking, power and revenge, and avoidance-of-failure behaviors. Recognizing the goal of the student’s behavior is the first step in identifying how to help students make better choices.

Attention Seeking Students

Attention seeking students are either active or passive attention seekers. An active attention seeking student will be equipped with many attention getting mechanisms. They tap their pencil on their desk, talk out of turn, are tardy to class, pass notes, trip classmates, and constantly plead for help while classmates quietly finish assignments. Passive attention seeking students don’t usually disrupt the entire class. They often dawdle, are slow to complete assignments, and are the last one to open their book.

There are three clues to help you identify attention-seeking behavior. First, when confronted with attention-seeking behavior, we generally feel irritated and annoyed. The needle on our emotional pressure gauge registers “mild”. Second, we typically react by nagging, reminding, cajoling, scolding - using words to try to discipline the child. Sometimes we react by coming to the rescue, taking over and doing for a student what the student should be doing independently. Third, when we intervene verbally or by rescuing attention getters, they’ve gotten what they looking for - our attention. So, they usually stop their negative behavior, at least temporarily. If they don’t stop, chances are good we’re dealing with power seeking rather than attention getting.

Attention-seeking behavior does have a silver lining. Students who seek a teacher’s attention are at least showing they want a relationship with the teachers. To prevent attention seeking behavior a teacher should give lots of attention for appropriate behavior and teach them how to appropriately ask for attention.
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Interventions for Attention Seeking students:

1. **Minimize the attention** that the student gets for bad behavior. You can try tricks like giving the student “The Eye” or stand in close proximity. You may be able to drop a short note on their desk to get them back on track.

2. **Clarify desired behavior** by using “Target-Stop-Do”. This three part message, given in a calm voice, targets the student by name, identifies the behavior to be stopped, and tells the student what he is expected to do. “David, stop talking to Jan, and turn to page 15 in your book.”

3. **Use a diminishing quota** by contracting with a student the number of times each day an undesired behavior (i.e. burping aloud in class) may take place that day. When that number is reached the teacher simply gestures to the student and says, “That’s it.” Each day the number is renegotiated in a diminishing manner until the behavior disappears.

4. **Distract the student** by asking him a direct question or asking him to do you a favor.

5. **Notice appropriate behavior.** The teacher can say something positive to a student who is behaving appropriately and sitting near the attention-seeking student. “Thank you, Juan, for listening and having your work ready to share with your partner.”

Revenge and Power Seeking Behavior

When students misbehave to get **revenge**, they are retaliating for real or imagined hurts. Such behavior often follows power-seeking tactics, especially if the teacher has responded to the power behavior with a show of force. Not all revenge behavior results for a power struggle with a teacher. Sometimes the revenge seeker feels slighted by the teacher, even thought the slight is unintentional. Revengeful behaviors can be active or passive. Active revengeful behavior could be defacing something you hold dear, verbal (“You’re the worst teacher ever”), or even threatening physical harm. However, most revengeful behavior is passive and often is seen as withdrawal. Withdrawn students are sullen, uncommunicative, and remote. Their lack of response is meant to hurt and frustrate teachers, and often it does.
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There are three clues to help identify revenge seeking behavior. First, not only may we feel anger and frustration, but hurt, disappointment, and even dislike for the student. Second, you find that your gut feeling wants you to react to this behavior by striking back or punishing the student severely. Third, revenge behavior doesn’t stop as quickly or as easily as attention getting, only being stopped on the student’s terms.

Power-seeking students constantly challenge us. Through words and actions, they try to prove that they, not we, are in charge. Students who are actively seeking power often throw tantrums. In lower grades this could be seen as crying, kicking, and refusing to listen. In older grades, it is often a verbal tantrum of talking back in a disrespectful, defiant manner. Passive power seekers rarely cause a scene and will only comply on their terms. For example, this student will quietly refuse to do a class assignment. They see this as spiting you.

Power seeking students can be identified by these three clues. First, dealing with this student will make you feel angry, frustrated and perhaps even fearful of losing control of the situation. Second, if you feel that your reaction is to want to fight back with words or give in, you may have a power seeking student. Third, the behavior doesn’t stop when you reprimand the student because the student is fighting for power. The behavior will only stop on their terms.

Interventions for Revenge and Power seeking students:

1. **Acknowledge student’s power** by making a statement such as “Dawn, I can’t make you do the math problems.” When we give up control, the student has nothing to resist.
2. **Table the matter** by saying something like “I’m not willing to talk with you right now.” You can set up a time to talk later.
3. **Use a fogging technique** by responding to inflammatory statements as if they are of little or no importance.
4. **Deliver a closing statement** such as “Unless you have something new to add, this conversation is finished.”
5. **Give them choice** by saying “Hector, you may sit quietly in your seat without bothering others, or you may go chill out in Mr. Jordan’s room. You decide”.
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Avoidance of Failure

We may fail to recognize *avoidance-of-failure* as a goal of misbehavior, since the student who is avoiding failure generally does not distract us or disrupt our classroom. Students who are avoiding failure seldom interact with teachers and peers, choosing to remain isolated in the classroom, halls, and lunchroom. The behavior problem isn’t usually what the student is doing, but what the student is not doing. Failure is impossible if the student neglects to complete projects and assignments because they cannot be judged or graded. Excuses are often given for why they cannot participate. If pushed into being defensive, the student may throw a frustration tantrum. However, this temper tantrum’s intent is different. The student may turn up the volume or collapse into tears hoping that the emotional outburst will allow them to avoid facing their failure.

There are *three clues* to help us determine if the misbehavior is avoidance-of-failure. First, you may feel professional concern, frustration, and perhaps despair. You may feel as if you simply can’t get through to that student. Second, your first reaction may be to give up trying, feeling that you are up against a brick wall. Third, when teachers give up trying and leave the student alone, the misbehavior doesn’t stop (as with attention), nor does it intensify on the student’s own terms (as with power or revenge). Rather, the young person’s response is usually to continue to avoid the task at hand.

Interventions for *avoidance-of-failure* behavior

1. **Modify Instructional Methods** by using colorful, self-explanatory materials. Differentiate your instruction to meet the needs of different types of learners.
2. **Provide Tutoring.**
3. **Encourage Positive Self-Talk** by initiating a rule that for every negative statement students say aloud about themselves, they must counter with two “put-ups”.
4. **Get rid of “I Can’ts.”** When a student says “I can’t”, counter with a response like “Of course you can. How can I help you?”
5. **Teach Procedures for Becoming “Unstuck”**. Some students stay stuck because they don’t know how to begin to ask for help. Teach them what you want them to do if they need some extra guidance.
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### Summary Chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What’s the student’s message?</th>
<th>How do I feel?</th>
<th>What do I usually do?</th>
<th>As a result, what does the student do?</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Look at me!”</td>
<td>Irritated, annoyed</td>
<td>Remind, nag, scold, rescue</td>
<td>Stops temporarily</td>
<td>Attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Let’s fight.”</td>
<td>Angry, frustrated</td>
<td>Fight back, give in</td>
<td>Continues, stops on own terms</td>
<td>Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’ll get even!”</td>
<td>Angry, hurt, disappointed, sense of dislike</td>
<td>Retaliate, punish severely, withdraw</td>
<td>Continues and intensifies, stops on own terms</td>
<td>Revenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Leave me alone.”</td>
<td>Professional concern, frustration</td>
<td>Give up trying, refer student to support services</td>
<td>Continues avoiding tasks</td>
<td>Avoidance-of-failure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Reference