

Behavior problems in the classroom

What to know, what to do

By **SUZANNE BOUFFARD**

According to recent survey data, more than 60% of public school teachers report high levels of job-related stress, making theirs one of the most stressful occupations in the U.S. (American Federation of Teachers, 2017). In part, their working conditions are to blame, say teachers, noting their heavy teaching loads, long hours, and intense pressure to raise test scores. But teaching itself is often highly stressful, they add, especially when it comes to managing behavior problems in the classroom, which might include anything from minor pushing and shoving to hitting, kicking, screaming, knocking over desks, and throwing chairs (Greenberg, Brown, & Abenavoli, 2016).

Yet, while students' classroom behavior problems loom large in many teachers' minds, few teachers receive significant training in how to prevent and address such problems (Stormont, Reinke, & Herman, 2011; Walter, Gouze, & Lim, 2006). Fortunately, recent research provides K-12 educators with some useful guidelines for how to address behavior problems effectively. Broadly speaking, two core principles stand out: First, evidence strongly favors the use of supportive classroom practices, emphasizing positive connections between adults and young people rather than strict discipline and harsh punishments. Second, it takes time and patience to resolve classroom behavior problems. Teachers rarely see dramatic changes from one day to the next. But over the long run, even the most serious behavior problems can be improved.

The big picture

For the purposes of this research brief, the term “behavior problems” refers to persistent behavioral challenges, particularly those that involve acting out, aggression, or other forms of externalizing that disrupt teaching and learning. The discussion focuses on students in general education classrooms, since there are

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distinct issues and research-based practices for students whose needs are best met in self-contained settings.

Within general education classrooms, behavior problems vary greatly in their expression, severity, and frequency, making it difficult to say precisely how common they are. For example, according to U.S. Department of Education statistics, roughly 350,000 students receive in-school services for diagnosed emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), a category of disability defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). Not all students with EBDs act out (some of them have more internalized problems like anxiety and depression), but many do.

However, the number of students with an EBD diagnosis likely represents just a small portion of those who have persistent behavior challenges. Many students are never given a diagnostic evaluation for EBD at all, and many others are given another diagnosis entirely. For example, 10% of American children (6-16% of boys and 2-9% of girls) have been diagnosed with conduct disorder (National Alliance on Mental Illness, no date), a psychiatric diagnosis referring to antisocial behavior such as aggression, cruelty, vandalism, and stealing.

In any case, while it's hard to say exactly how many students act out in the classroom, it's clear that a large proportion of those students have serious needs that are not being met. Experts have estimated that only about 1% of young people who struggle with behavioral and emotional issues receive support services in schools (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2012).

Anecdotal reports from teachers suggest also that behavior problems have become more common in recent years. But that begs the question, has student behavior actually worsened, or have we just become more aware of these problems and more adept at labeling them?

The existing data present a mixed picture. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, some problems (including bullying, sexual harassment, and student verbal abuse of teachers) have actually decreased over the past 15 years, while others (outward disrespect for teachers and "widespread classroom disorder") have remained fairly constant. Looking beyond schools, some laboratory-based studies suggest that children today have less impulse control and shorter attention spans than they did fifty years ago (Lewis, 2018). However, we don't know if that trend is linked to school behavior problems, and it is worth noting that not all children with impulse control and attention issues act out in disruptive ways.

Whether student behavior is getting better or worse, though, it's impossible to ignore the effects of behavioral problems. For example, 9% of teachers report being physically threatened by students (NCES, 2018), and even relatively minor disruptions tend to distract other students and reduce instructional time. Overall, a high incidence of classroom behavior problems has been found to be associated with classmates having lower achievement test scores in both the early grades and the middle school years (Blank & Shavit, 2016; Gottfried, 2014). Further, some studies suggest that young children exposed to high levels of classroom aggression over multiple years are more likely to become aggressive themselves (Thomas & Bierman, 2006).

Behavioral and academic problems tend to reinforce each other in negative ways. For example, about half of children with an EBD also have a learning disability. In and of themselves, disabilities can make classwork frustrating, which can trigger emotional outbursts. And at the same time, emotional outbursts can make it harder to focus on learning, which only increases students' frustration, while also alienating the teachers and staff who might be able to help them (Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald, 2007). One result is that students with EBDs have very low graduation rates (in the 30-40% range), and nearly 30% of those who leave school early are arrested within two years, a number that rises to nearly 60% within eight years (Newman, Wagner, Knokey, et al., 2011).

First, what *doesn't* work

Educators come to schools with varying perspectives, child-rearing philosophies, and beliefs about discipline, but it is important that their approaches to dealing with behavior problems be grounded not in their subjective beliefs but in research on what works — and what doesn't. Some discipline methods that seem intuitive have shown little evidence of effectiveness in research studies, and some even show the opposite effects of what they are intended to achieve.

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