

Why Are My Students Misbehaving and What Can I Do About It?



The issue of human behaviour is an extremely complex one, however, in the context of behaviour management in schools there are some basic principles worth noting. Being aware of these principles can help us to understand why students behave the way they do, and enable us to develop effective behaviour management systems.

You have probably heard the catch phrase regarding the need for teachers to understand "how students learn" in order to deliver effective learning programs. Perhaps there should be a phrase encouraging teachers to know "why students behave the way they do" in order to implement effective behaviour management programs.

Below is an outline of reasons as to why students may be misbehaving. I have broken them up into three categories:

1. The student's basic needs are not being met.
2. The student is trying to achieve certain goals through their misbehaviour.
3. External factors.

THE BASIC NEEDS OF HUMANS

Students may be misbehaving because their basic needs are not being met. There are many viewpoints on the basic needs of humans. Three examples are listed below.

Glasser describes them as:

- Basic physiological needs - food, shelter, safety
- Belonging and love
- Power - control/influence over your life and recognition
- Freedom
- Fun

Covey, Merrill and Merrill list them as:

- To live (physical needs) - food, clothing, shelter, health, basic economic means (money)
- To learn (mental needs) - learning, growing, stimulation
- To love (social needs) - to belong, to love, to be loved
- To leave a legacy (spiritual needs) - to have a sense of purpose and direction, to make a contribution, to know what values are important to you

Reilly also has a list which is similar to the above but also adds:

- Ego food - from success and achievement

And Carnegie adds:

- Sex (dependent on age and individual)

I have developed a list which is a composite of them all:

BASIC NEEDS LIST

Physical

- Food

- Clothing
- Shelter
- Safety
- Health
- Sex (dependent on age and individual)
- Basic economic means (money)

Mental

- Learning and growing
- Stimulation
- Power (control/influence over your life)
- Recognition
- Fun
- Ego food (from success and achievement)

Social

- To belong
- To love
- To be loved

Spiritual

- To have positive interaction with others
- Sense of purpose
- Sense of direction
- Making a contribution
- Sense of identity - knowing "who you are" and what values are important to you

Can you identify any of your misbehaving students who may be lacking in basic needs?

GOALS OF MISBEHAVIOUR

Students don't always have a goal for their misbehaviour, but if their inappropriate behaviour is consistent they are probably trying to achieve one of the goals listed below. This is not a definitive list but can act as a guide for us to try and understand "why students behave the way they do".

Bennett and Smilanich list four goals of misbehaviour as identified by Rudolf Dreikers:

- **Attention.**
- **Power** - typified by defiance, questioning, power struggles within peer group or with the teacher.
- **Revenge** - wants to hurt others because they are hurting.
- **Assumed disability** - belief that they have no ability so they don't want to work (and fail).

Can you identify any of your misbehaving students who may trying to achieve any of these goals and are you playing into their hands?

EXTERNAL FACTORS

There may be other reasons why a student is misbehaving such as:

- Under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.
- Medical conditions.
- Adverse effects of certain foods in their diet.
- Lack of social skills - have not been taught how to behave appropriately.
- Lack of self discipline
- A group dynamics problem - see "The Problem Class" checklist.

Or some people might say:

- A full moon
- A windy day
- A drop in barometric pressure
- Alignment of the planets

Who knows, there might be something in it!

ADDRESSING THESE POSSIBLE REASONS FOR MISBEHAVIOUR

1. We need to help students meet their **basics needs** through the provision of:
 - A positive school environment which is safe, caring and inclusive.
 - Pastoral care and student services programs to help students in need.
 - Appropriate and engaging teaching and learning programs which cater for individual difference, and allow students to be challenged and experience some success.
2. Make sure we are not giving students what they want (ie, achieving their **goals of misbehaviour**), when we discipline them eg, attention, power, getting out of doing work.
3. Be aware of and minimise the influence of **external factors** which may be contributing to poor behaviour.

CONDITIONING STUDENTS TO BEHAVE WELL

Peoples' behaviour is a reflection of their desire or urge to meet their basic needs and as Napoleon said: is driven by self interest or fear. Individuals behave the way they do because they believe that this behaviour will:

- lead them towards "*pleasure*" (meeting their basic needs or reaching their goals of misbehaviour).
- and or away from "*pain*" (discomfort or something they don't want to do).

Their strongest emotion at any given time will determine which way their behaviour goes - good or bad.

So to encourage good behaviour:

We need to condition students who misbehave into believing that:

- changing their behaviour will lead to *pleasure*
- not changing will be more *painful* than changing.

Consequences for misbehaviour need to:

- lead to *pain* (discomfort, loss of privileges, or something they don't want to do)
- so that they associate bad behaviour with *pain*.

Good behaviour needs to lead to *pleasure*

- so that they associate good behaviour with *pleasure*.

For students that continue to misbehave we need to ensure that they:

- realise that what they are doing is actually wrong or inappropriate
- make the **connection** between what they do (good or bad behaviour) and their particular emotions at the time.
- have support systems available in order to develop strategies to help them break their pattern of bad behaviour.

This document is an excerpt from the 'Behaviour Management Toolkit' by David Koutsoukis

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