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## Chapter 7

# Averting and Dealing with Discipline Problems

### A Short Story

Ms. Swick stood outside the Time Out Room waiting for the bell that signaled the start of her duty period, thinking how much she would like ANY other duty but the one she was about to begin. Mr. Richards, who usually stopped by on his way to lunch, was with her and privy to what Ms. Swick referred to as “disaster in the making” one door away.

At the bell, Ms. Swick heard Mrs. James, the teacher in the adjacent room, scream in a shrill voice, “Sit down! Are you stupid or something? Do I have to tell you every day what you are supposed to do? I’m so sick of trying to teach dummies like you. You’ll never pass this course.”

Ms. Swick shuddered. Mr. Richards shook his head. They had heard this particular teacher berate students before but usually not so early in the period. Ms. Swick braced herself, awaiting the inevitable... the arrival of angry students who she was supposed to contain until the end of the period.

Within minutes a hall guard entered Mrs. James’ classroom and physically removed two of the students. While screaming profanities at Mrs. James in front of an entertained class, the hall guard restrained the boys from re-entering the room and, with difficulty, delivered them to the Time Out Room.

Carlos, one of the students, was furious and ready to go to battle. He paced the TOR shouting, “Who the f... does she think she is? That lying b.... She’s asking for it. She can’t disrespect us that way.”

Let's not beat around the bush, dealing with severely emotionally disturbed (SED) students is a challenge. They come to your class with serious emotional baggage that has been accumulating for years. They are frustrated, probably angry, and often distrustful. You know full well that such problems are beyond your problem-solving capability even if you did have time after developing and teaching curriculum aligned to state standards and working with the myriad daily concerns of a full roster of active teens. Believe me, you are not alone in seeking solutions and trying to survive. Indeed, the needs of this population are a national concern; many feel their failure in the classroom ensures their failure in school and in society.

Let's also be honest enough to admit that teachers and paraprofessionals who work with ED students are more likely to burn out than those who teach any other

population! This isn't said to frighten you, but to set the record straight about the importance of what you've undertaken. All that we've said in prior chapters was laying the groundwork for this all-important issue of classroom management with ED students, for their benefit, the benefit of all students, and for your own survival.

You are all aware that discipline is the make it or break it issue in a high school. Firm, fair and consistent discipline is the key to the success of students, staff, and schools. No teaching or learning can take place without it. Students and staff are not secure in their learning environment without it. Lack of it is the one thing that scares most people about today's high schools. Kids hear stories about out of control schools and fear entering them, new teachers refuse to



The Center for  
Effective Collaboration

and Practice (1994) cites the following disturbing data: 1. SED students have lower grades than any other group of students. 63% of those who took minimal competency tests failed. 2. Only 42% of SED students graduate high school as opposed to approximately 76% in the regular population. 3. 48% of SED high school students drop out between grades 9-12, 8% drop out prior to high school. 4. SED students are absent more than any other group of students with disabilities (average of 18 days). 5. 20% of SED students are arrested at least once before exiting high school; 58% within five years. 73% of the dropouts are arrested within 5 years of terminating their education.

apply to them and experienced teachers transfer out of them, substitutes will not accept work in them and administrators are replaced because of them.



Work on ways to refresh yourself by reducing stress. Allot a given amount of time daily for grading papers and fine-tuning the next day's lessons. Try to organize yourself in such a way as not to exceed a reasonable amount. Make time daily for personal stress-busters whether it's walking, aerobics, meditation or quiet reading time. Short periods of away-from-the-job activities can be restorative and improve your effectiveness.

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Unfortunately, we have seen a high school go out of control; seven principals coming and going in four years give testimony to the importance of disciplinary policy in the eyes of school board and community members, not to mention concerned staff and students. Undeniably, out of control accurately described our high school. It also described many of our students and it also described too many of our teachers.

The situation in our school deteriorated to the point that a fearful central administration expanded the administrative staff in an effort to turn things around. We had a principal, four assistant principals, two deans of students, a director of security and 25 roving security personnel to attempt to bring order for approximately 2100 students and 150 teachers. In an effort to forge and enforce a viable disciplinary policy, meetings were held with "stakeholders" (an expression used by administrators trying to sound current and used in documents as proof of their attempts to involve rather than dictate) to delineate problem areas and brainstorm solutions. Regrettably, the situation is not yet optimal; there is a continued need for informed leadership, trust and a concerted and coordinated staff effort. Nevertheless, we've had considerable time to reflect on what went wrong, what went right, what could be done, what must be done and what should never be done.

### *Bottom Line*

**Disrespecting students breeds their own student anger and disrespect for you.**

Hopefully, you do not have such difficulties; you and your school staff work together as a team to develop and ensure an optimal learning environment. Every individual teacher is a part of the overall school disciplinary program and should make every effort to help establish and maintain a danger-free, orderly school. But, if you are in a situation in which you feel powerless to improve the schoolwide discipline policy and environment, keep in mind that you do have power within your classroom. We have noted with much relief, that professional teachers in our school continue to successfully create secure, effective learning environments within the overall chaos, allowing for productive learning within their classrooms.

Adversity forced us to learn and to stretch our limits about disciplinary procedures. We realize that all teachers, mainstream or special education, fear working with the ED population, the group most prone to out of control behaviors. IEPs and possible Behavior Intervention Plans should give insight and some guidelines, but you are on the frontline daily trying to educate while dealing with some unpredictable behaviors.

We caution you, do not expect to exercise control over ED students, or any student for that matter. Indeed there are many things that you can't control: The school environment, administrative decisions, parents, other staff members, student behavior, particularly that of the ED students. What we have realized is that the only real control you have is over yourself. You can, with self-discipline and focus, control what you say and what you do and, importantly, provide a positive role model for students to emulate, which directly impacts on student behavior in your class. When your general classroom environment is pleasant, calm, respectful and purposeful, there is much less risk of disruptions from ED students or any other students. When a teacher, like Mrs. James in the opening novella, is out of control, the classroom situation is out of control.

This chapter will focus on you, teachers, and the steps that can be taken to insure your own control, no matter the situation. We intend to show how you can still be good, even when "things are bad!" You, your mind set and your behavior are the keys to effective discipline, especially of the ED student.

### *Bottom Line*

Teaching the emotionally disturbed student can be very stressful.



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If you suspect a student is under the influence, do not confront him. Irrational behavior and denial may be the least of the resultant problems. Know your school's established procedure for suspected drug abuse. Alert the nurse, security or administration to your suspicions and have them handle the situation outside of your classroom.

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Better to be part of the cure than part of the problem. Avoid the blame-game. Work with the student to analyze causes of classroom problems and alternative ways of dealing with them. Keep an open mind in case it's you or your techniques that are causing student discomfort. Encourage the student to develop appropriate alternatives that reduce the incidence of misbehaviors. Develop an agreed upon mode of signaling frustration, perhaps a tap on her desk or a special hand sign to alert the student to the need to utilize the alternative.



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Try to validate student importance. SED students often have few caring, positive adult and peer relationships. Your interest in them, perhaps merely a greeting or warm encouragement, may lift spirits and dispel feelings of isolation and worthlessness. Attending games or activities in which the student is involved underscores your interest. If you can manage it, introduce humor into a non-acute disciplinary situation., e.g. threaten to sing, dance or tell corny jokes if they don't settle down!

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Your positive stance and attitude may well avert confrontations and serious misbehavior in your classroom. Problem-students, classified ED or not, often have little difficulty with certain teachers and tremendous difficulties with others. Make certain that you are one who doesn't provoke. Bear in mind that what goes on outside your room, is not under your control. It may be that other teachers have such overwhelming problems with the same students that administration will determine that an alternative placement is necessary.

### *Bottom Line*

**Many ED students respond to aversive treatment by escalating the problem.**

**10. Enlist parental support in dealing with the academic performance and misbehavior of ED students.**

Frequently, by the time these students reach high school, many of the parents are worn out, worn down and about ready to give up. Parents who recognize your genuine concern are often anxious to share techniques that have proven to be effective or not. Parent-teacher collaboration is optimal. We caution that repeated phone calls or conferences that are accusatory or focused only on the negative tend to be counterproductive. Also, be aware that negative letters sent home are often intercepted and trashed before a parent or guardian is aware of them.

***Considerations Prior to Disciplinary Response***

Before we move on to some suggested teacher responses to specific disciplinary problems, let us be certain to clarify what may only have been alluded to hitherto. We are firm in our belief that students, especially ED students, should be held accountable for misbehavior. We encourage you to use your discretion in determining whether no response is the best response; sometimes ignoring minor infractions does reduce the incidence. For major infractions we contend that showing concern and compassion does not mean overlooking inappropriateness. Teachers who avoid assigning consequences for serious disciplinary infractions become part of the problem, contributing to student anti-social behavior. Indeed, real concern would be demonstrated by helping students take responsibility for monitoring and changing their own behavior.

Over the years, we have seen how skilled students can be at conning us, how they have worked the flaws in the system to their benefit. We also have seen how easy it is for students to generalize behaviors. Given the unfortunate incidence of ED involvement in criminal behavior and lack of success in society at large, it's imperative that certain classroom misbehavior is noted and efforts are made for teaching appropriate behaviors.

The ED population comes to you with a variety of disabilities that range from serious depression or withdrawal, to hostile, aggressive acting out behaviors. We make no pretense in

*Bottom Line*

**Separate the student from the behavior she demonstrates.**





Start a "Mind-Body Club." Most teens are very concerned about their physical appearance and are anxious to look fit. Collaborating with an interested physical education teacher to develop a weight-lifting or fitness class that ties in with study help can be an effective way to develop rapport and sneak in some academic assistance!

expecting that you will be able to sort out the underlying causes, perhaps hormonal, neurological, familial, societal, peer related, socio-economic or some combination thereof. But, we feel it is imperative to try to discern the motive behind the behavior, be it a desire for power, attention, self-confidence, or revenge, so that you can more accurately determine a suitable response to the misbehavior.

Over the years, we have come face to face with a wide variety of behavioral and emotional problems that have challenged us to the core. Jose was one teen that typified the chronic

latecomer. A likeable, humorous and attractive Hispanic, Jose selectively attended classes. He generally attended classes with teachers he liked, arriving up to 20 minutes after the late bell, lacking pen, notebook, and text. He would borrow a pen and paper and finally give some attention to the lesson. As frustrating as this behavior was, even more so was the recognition that here was a boy gifted with higher level thinking skills. Jose could quickly synthesize information and generalize conclusions; he was someone with real intellectual potential. Unfortunately, he could only read on a second or third grade level, his spelling and writing skills were negligible, and sadly, he seemed to regard himself as a loser. His mom, working two jobs to support

**F.Y.I.**  
Van Acker and  
Talbot (Fall 1999) suggest

that the use of aversive or punitive treatment may be counterproductive with students with aggressive behaviors. Familiar and accustomed to aversive treatment, many of these students become more alienated and more aggressive as their resentment and resistance grows. Studies indicate a circular relationship between aggressive students and discipline issues. Interestingly, aggressive students are almost twice as likely to be reprimanded for a rule infraction than those not noted to have aggressive behaviors.

the family, was rarely home. She had really given up on Jose and consequently Jose had gotten in the habit of “doing his own thing,” which wasn’t sufficient for passing.

In spite of repeated and continual efforts to support and guide Jose, it was not until his third year in ninth grade that a minor miracle occurred. Jose discovered a talent in break-dancing and won several county competitions. He determined to put together a squad of break dancers, train them, get costumes and compete in the high school talent contest. This was the impetus for Jose to attend school on a regular basis, to see the connection between tardiness and promptness, preparedness and unpreparedness. He walked taller, attended class more regularly and he and his dance squad won the talent contest. The verdict is still out on his eventual graduation, but he has made several significant behavioral breakthroughs that we hope will enable him to find some success in the working world.

Another of our students had rather different problems. Lizabeth, an obese 10th grade teen, assumed a punk-like attitude and mode of dress, complete with black clothes, purple lipstick, lots of death-head jewelry, silver rings on most fingers, heavy chains around the neck, an eyebrow ring and a cascade of earrings up the earlobe. Rarely speaking to adults or peers, Lizabeth ghosted through the school week. It was difficult to determine academic potential or deficits. Work was minimally done. She sat by herself in class, infrequently looking up, choosing to avoid answering direct questions, or responding in an almost inaudible manner. She sat numbly during group work. In the hallways and cafeteria, she remained isolated.

Our unease for Lizabeth resulted in scrutiny of her IEP followed by a meeting with the psychologist. The terms “severe long-term depression” and “suicidal tendency” certainly concerned us, and her withdrawal and isolation were hardly optimistic signs. We were pleased to eventually note that Lizabeth, placed into a resource room at our request, began to develop a relationship with that small group of students, enough to discuss her poetry and some of the books she felt important. Dealing with her in the inclusion setting took on a new perspective after we had a deeper understanding of the situation.

### *Bottom Line*

**Sometimes the most you can hope to do is avoid major problem behaviors.**

A third student was one dreaded by most teachers, and steered clear of by students. Carl, a large, well-developed teen, was a difficult boy to like. He wore his anger on his face, in his stance and in every word he spoke. Abused and abandoned as a child, he had passed through the foster care system like water through a sieve. He trusted no one, was always ready to put peers and teachers down or challenge them physically and verbally. He reported to class exactly at the bell and slid into his assigned seat with the tightness of a coiled spring. If challenged, he would rise to his feet, close the distance between the “accuser” and himself, and prepare for battle.

Finding a way to contain and teach Carl was a major challenge. Yes, he frightened most teachers and classmates; he seemed to sense their fear and enjoy it. He defied direct, overt attention but we found he would respond to oblique assistance offered in what appeared as a non-intentional manner. We determined to use the “catch him with honey method,” meaning we refused to succumb to his insolence and intentional efforts to anger us, but waited at the door to greet him with a smile and quiet hello. We insisted that he complete his work. **And**, we accidentally found a key to reducing the tension he caused. Carl loved equipment: Making it work, setting it up and breaking it down. One day when the lesson was dependent upon a snippet from tape and the VCR refused to cooperate, he got up and fixed it. From that time forward, he became the AV man for our class. No, he didn’t become friendly, personable or even terribly likeable. He did become manageable. As often is the case with hostile and aggressive youth, Carl’s behavior and attitude won him enemies in powerful places. Administration and security seemed to seek him out whenever there was trouble and out-of-school and in-school suspensions was his usual reward. Unhappily, the last we heard, Carl was in a juvenile detention facility upstate.

### *Bottom Line*

Look for the motive of misbehavior as it will help you determine a more appropriate response.



Daily, greet your students by name at the door. Wear your best smile. You will be surprised at the positive outcome from this simple but affirming habit.

We realize that you probably have such students in your classroom. Keep in mind that your daily role modeling of pro-social behaviors may be having more impact than you know. Sometimes you undoubtedly feel that the responsibility to deal with them and try to teach them is beyond your capability. Consequently, we have tried to assemble some management hints for the more difficult and common ED behaviors you will have to face. The following table deals with some common behavior problems that disrupt teacher serenity and the classroom environment. There are many variations on each theme. We suggest you always attempt to separate the student from the misbehavior and most importantly, retain your professional cool while displaying concern.

*Bottom Line*

Some problem behaviors irritate the teacher but do not bother the students.

**Problem Behavior and Response Table**

Demonstrated Behavior/Problem	Possible Cause/Motive	Possible Teacher Response
<p><b>The Passive/Apathetic</b> Refuses to cooperate, respond, participate, comply, fails to do work.</p> <p><b>Problem:</b> Can be contagious. Concerns teacher due to non-compliance and poor academic performance.</p>	<p>Could be manifestation of deep depression. Could be result of repeated failures, deep anger, frustration, disinterest in subject, bored, distrustful, desire for revenge, lack of confidence in self or teacher. Poor nutrition, poor sleeping habits or drug abuse.</p>	<p>Attempt to narrow down cause. If you suspect severe depression, seek help from professional staff at school. Provide simple directions, tasks for sure success. Attempt to involve student. Do not lower expectations, but provide caring assistance. Attempt to develop personal relationship. Make efforts to show relevancy of topic or assignment.</p> <p><b>Do not</b> confront in front of peers.</p>
<p><b>The Chronic Late-comer</b> Late to class, late handing in assignments, late meeting requirements.</p> <p><b>Problem:</b> Disrupts lesson. Aggravates teacher. Causes need for reteaching, refocusing class. Can be contagious.</p>	<p>May feel alienated from school and peers. May be seeking attention, wants the power of controlling behavior, has developed the habit of lateness, may indicate lack of organization in personal life.</p>	<p>Begin the class on time. Establish and enforce rules for lateness. <b>Do not</b> ask for reasons for tardiness and <b>do not</b> make an issue of lateness. Assume student is present and act as if he is (place supplies on desk, etc.). Assign seat near door to diminish interruption. Counsel student after class. Keep accurate records; notify attendance office without sending student out from class. Help student see the detrimental aspects of this poor habit. Find ways to recognize student for positive behaviors. Help to involve student in class activities.</p>

Demonstrated Behavior/Problem	Possible Cause/Motive	Possible Teacher Response
<p><b>The Chronic Curser</b> continually uses profanity with peers and teachers.</p> <p><b>Problem:</b> Teacher annoyance, student entertainment, upsetting behavior. Can be contagious. Demeans teacher and his authority.</p>	<p>May be intentional or not. Student may not perceive it as disrespectful. May use profanities as power tool over peers and teachers. May use swearing as "bait and switch" technique to change focus of attention. May be effort to claim attention and exercise some control.</p>	<p>Control your anger. Determine motive. Determine consequence based on motive. <b>Do not</b> demean student; state privately that swearing is unacceptable. Give a warning and if behavior is repeated, a consequence. Help student develop an alternative, even if a humorous word is used as a replacement. Change will be slow. <b>Do not</b> reject student because of profanities.</p>
<p>The <b>Disrespector</b> continually puts down or ignores peers and teachers, verbally or non-verbally. Talks back and is unkind and inconsiderate to all.</p> <p><b>Problem:</b> Peers or teacher may feel threatened, angry and abused. Teacher diminished in own eyes and in those of class.</p>	<p>Pervasive anger. Revenge. Disrespected in own life, developed the habit of disrespecting others. May indicate a lack of understanding or empathy for others, could be attempt at control and power.</p>	<p>Do not corner student or reply in angry manner. Respond with professional confrontation to student. Make it clear that behavior is unacceptable. Suggest acceptable alternatives. <b>Do not</b> permit behavior to continue. Counsel with student after class. If necessary, seek services of guidance counselor or psychologist. Do not reject student even though you reject behaviors. Try to develop personal relationship or find someone on staff who might be able to forge a positive relationship with student. <b>Do not</b> retaliate. Keep the focus on the misbehavior and her responsibility for it.</p>
<p>The <b>Chronic Cutter</b> or <b>Absentee</b> attends class or school erratically or not at all.</p>	<p>Sees no relevance in school; has more appealing alternatives. Has not been successful in school. Does not feel a part of the school, student population. May not have home expectation of school success or completion. Lacks confidence in ability. Lacks friends. Possible drug abuse or gang affiliation.</p>	<p>Deal first with issue on non-attendance. Try to determine an interest that the school can meet; develop reason for attendance. <b>Do not</b> overwhelm student with trying to catch up on incomplete assignments; focus on the day's work and a reason for her attendance the next day. Enlist the support of parents. <b>Do not</b> argue with the student or attempt to convince him that attendance is mandatory. Clearly, it is not. Try to help the student to acknowledge the pros and cons of truancy vs. attendance. Offer your support in completing and comprehending class assignments.</p>

Demonstrated Behavior/Problem	Possible Cause/Motive	Possible Teacher Response
<p>The <b>Impulsive</b> seems unable to restrain self, to wait appropriately. Talks first, thinks later. Acts first, thinks later. Difficulty following directions, staying on task.</p> <p><b>Problem:</b> Disrupts class with interruptions. Can cause others to be distracted. Aggravating to teacher and often to peers. Can be contagious.</p>	<p>Could be multi-handicapped, ADD or ADHD. Could have language deficiency or difficulty understanding expectations. Could be seeking attention. Becomes habitual.</p>	<p>Observe what preceded impulsive responses. Attempt to show student cause or frequency of misbehavior and the ramifications for self and class. Encourage self-monitoring program. Anticipate problem by observing body cues. Try refocusing student or move closer to the student to see if that provides him with necessary help or attention. Perhaps ignore or do not acknowledge negative but focus on positive. Seat near compliant, responsible student. If necessary, seat in back of room and allow student to stand if absolutely necessary. Tell student what you want, not what you don't want. Avoid lecturing.</p>
<p>The <b>Hostile</b> student is perpetually angry, seemingly without provocation.</p> <p><b>Problem:</b> Difficult to control. Threatens. Refuses to accept routines, rules, comply with expectations. Wastes time. Causes confusion, anger, fear, disruption.</p>	<p>Wants control, power, attention or revenge. Objects to authority, rules. Could be drug or gang involvement. Could be result of abusive relationship. Could be result of repeated failures, academic or social.</p>	<p>Refuse to be baited. Continue to be pleasant while firm in expectation that class procedures must be followed. If possible, use humor. Affirm worth of student with your behavior and respect. <b>Do not</b> give student the stage. Handle misbehaviors quietly and personally as much as possible. <b>Do not</b> back student into corner, emotionally or physically. <b>Do not</b> threaten. Follow through with appropriate consequences to misbehavior. Give options. Allow student to appropriately express complaints or displeasure. Consider validity and merit. Give benefit of the doubt, rephrase questions or comments as model for appropriateness. Try to be non-judgmental and respond without emotion. Attempt to provide opportunities for positive leadership roles within classroom.</p>

Adapted from "You Can Handle Them All" web site ([www.disciplinehelp.com/instruct/main.htm](http://www.disciplinehelp.com/instruct/main.htm))