



## 6 Powerful, Soul-Searching Things To Say To Difficult Students

We had a large email response to a recent article called, [How To Talk To Difficult Students](#).

Most readers emailed to express how much easier dealing with difficult students had become after putting the suggestions to use.

But others wanted specifics.

They wanted to know exactly *what* to say to difficult students – and when. Excellent questions, to be sure, and I'm thrilled to revisit one of my favorite topics.

But before moving ahead, it's important to note that unless you hold **your most challenging students** accountable for their poor behavior, then little of what you say will make a difference.

Because the words you use only hold meaning for them inasmuch as they deepen, underscore, or highlight lessons already learned – or in the process of being learned.

A timely word or two, though, can help bring these sometimes-hard lessons to life, allowing students to see their mistakes – and successes – in a new light.

The right words can also help build rapport and influence, buoy sagging spirits, and provide that metaphorical kick in the pants all of us need once in a while.

Below you'll find six powerful, soul-searching phrases, none of which require an outward response from students.

In fact, they're more effective if you don't wait for one. For these are words you leave with them – to ponder, marinate in, and grapple with – not words that require anything from them.

And like the flash and crack of unexpected lightening, they're sure to get their attention.

### **1. *"You're better than that."***

When: After an incident of misbehavior, perhaps while the student is sitting in time-out.

Why: It is both a statement of fact and a challenge. And coming from someone they respect, four little words never said so much. Like flipping a switch, it's a remark that can instantly change a student's attitude from feeling sorry for themselves or proudly smug to determined not to make the same mistake again.

### **2. *"This is not who you are."***

When: At the end of a bad day, perhaps while the student is reading the **behavior letter** you presented him (or her) to take home.

Why: Through their words and actions, most teachers communicate to difficult students that their misbehavior *is* who they are, all but guaranteeing that poor behavior will not only continue, but get worse. This comment, though, said with calm conviction, assures them that it isn't true.

### 3. *"That's not good enough."*

When: After a period of improvement.

Why: Difficult students are used to receiving heavy praise for modest improvement, and so this statement can come as a shock. At first glance it appears to be a criticism, but in effect it's a powerful morale booster — because it lets them know that you believe in them, and that they're capable of so much more.

### 4. *"You can do this."*

When: Before trusting them with a delicate task or assignment, one that in the past would have tripped them up and caused unwanted behavior.

Why: As you begin to see improvement, you *must* give difficult students opportunities to take the next step. And so just before sending them off to work on a class project with their friends, for example, look them in the eye and make this remark with fist-pumping intensity.

### 5. *"Now that is how you do it!"*

When: After real success — not just improvement, mind you, and not simply a brief moment in time, but a clear and convincing change in behavior.

Why: From behavior contracts to scoldings to **meaningless praise**, most difficult students have been told they're different for so long that failure becomes part of their DNA. This statement tells them otherwise, assuring them that they don't have to be any better or try any harder – it's living, breathing proof that they really *can* do it.

## 6. *"I believe in you."*

When: After hitting rock bottom.

Why: When a difficult student is feeling down about his misbehavior, it's best to leave him alone with his thoughts. So many teachers interrupt this essential self-examination by trying to soften the blow – which spoils the lesson. After giving him time and space, however, this passing remark can mean the world to him.

## **Like An Angel**

Because they've known so many of them, because they've been manipulated, coddled, indulged, and falsely praised ten times over, difficult students can pick a phony a mile away.

And so unless you genuinely believe in what you're saying, it's best not to say anything at all.

But sparingly used and in the right moments, with just the right tone and intonation, and with stripped down, unadulterated, eyeball-to-eyeball honesty...

Your words will have power.

So when you appear unexpected, like a guardian angel from on high, and deliver the message they most need to hear...