



SMART CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Dealing With Difficult Students: The First Critical Step

So you have a new student this year who is unlike anything you've ever experienced.

It's as if he (or she) has never been to school before.

He is needy, highly emotional, and aggravating to other students. He misbehaves when you turn your back. He argues and complains at every turn, and will throw a temper tantrum if he doesn't get his way.

And no matter what you do, no matter how patient, kind, and understanding you are, no matter how hard you try to win him over, he repays you with disrespect.

You lie awake at night thinking about him.

You talk about him with your colleagues at every lunch break. You secretly dread spending another day with him.

His parents . . . well, presumably they're trying their best, but your phone calls, letters, and conferences haven't made a difference.

So now what?

First Things First

When an unusually difficult student winds up in your classroom, your first step is to do what none of his previous teachers have done before you:

Put a stop to the incessant praising and rewarding.

You see, in an effort to “catch them doing something good,” difficult students are often showered with praise and rewards and high fives for merely doing what they’re supposed to do.

The idea is that by praising them for doing what you want (i.e., what is expected), they’ll feel good about themselves and continue doing it. That is the intention. But in reality what it does is tell them that they aren’t good enough.

It tells them loud and clear that they *can’t* do it, that they’re different from the other students, that they don’t have the same capabilities.

Why else would they be given so much extra attention?

This realization, which can come as early as kindergarten, is crushing to their pride and self-worth and encourages rather than discourages misbehavior.

Sadly, this bar-lowering strategy is widely, even enthusiastically, recommended. And thus, every teacher before you has more than likely poured it on heavy and thick – day after day, year after year.

Until **you** come along.

When you decide to put an end to this dishonest, condescending practice, and start treating him like he *can* do it – and not like it's some wonderful accomplishment to sit still during one of your lessons – then you most definitely will get his attention.

Because you'll be unlike any teacher he has ever known.

His ears will perk and his eyes will narrow. He'll look at you differently. He may even study you, be curious about you, and not be sure what to make of you. And then he'll begin to see himself differently too. Subtly at first, an unfamiliar feeling will begin to grow inside of him.

By refusing to placate him with made-up certificates, throwaway lines of false praise, or ginned up enthusiasm, you'll be giving him a precious gift:

His first taste of dignity.

And when the sweet, delicious fruit of self-respect begins to slake his long neglected thirst, he'll want more.

And more.

So does this mean that you'll never praise him? Not in the least. It means that when you do praise him, it will only be because it is well earned. It will only be because real change in behavior has taken place – proven under your skeptical, watchful eye.

But then, the way you praise will also be different than what he is used to.

Because it is based on truth, you won't want to cheapen it with a public display, an over-the-top celebration, or a meaningless "good job." No, you'll want to **share his accomplishment more authentically.**

A knowing look or nod from across the room, a carefully written note attached to the inside of his desk, a whisper in his ear . . .

When the right moment presents itself, when you feel a stirring in your heart, a welling up of pride in witnessing true accomplishment . . .

You'll know what to do.