



## How To Handle Disrespectful Students Who Don't Know They're Being Disrespectful

By Michael Linsin

A student points their finger inches from your face and teasingly says, “I’m mad at you. That homework last night was hard!”

Or . . .

A student raises their hand and *commands* you to “Tell John to stop bothering me.”

In either case you’re uncomfortable with the way you’ve been addressed. It’s given you pause, and you’re unsure how to respond.

On one hand, neither student appears to have any malicious intent.

From their tone of voice and body language, it’s clear they don’t realize they’re being disrespectful.

On the other hand, they *are* being disrespectful, no doubt about it.

So how should you proceed?

Should you follow [your classroom management plan](#) as it’s written and risk causing confusion and resentment? Or should you ignore their disrespect on the grounds that they don’t know any better and risk more of the same behavior?

What follows are seven steps that will allow you to handle this surprisingly common situation with grace and sensitivity, while all but removing the chances of it happening again.

### **1. Move on.**

The first step is to quickly move on from the incident while neither endorsing nor condemning their behavior. The key here is to keep your cool, avoiding any outward expression of anger or disappointment.

A thin smile and a nod of the head will usually suffice. However, if applicable, you may have to calmly tell the student that you'll speak to them about it later.

### **2. Pull aside.**

After the incident is forgotten (30 minutes is a good rule of thumb), pull the student aside for a quick word. Here at SCM we typically don't recommend private meetings or powwows with students regarding their behavior. In this case, however, it's warranted.

### **3. Avoid confrontation.**

There is no reason to question the student or force assurances from them. Your sole purpose is to educate. You see, when you tell students "this is the way it is," they readily accept it. It's when you browbeat them into telling you what you want to hear that they become defensive and argumentative.

### **4. Recount and inform.**

Recount the exact actions and words the student used that triggered your instinct that their behavior was disrespectful. Then simply inform them that it crossed the line, that it isn't okay to speak to a teacher the way they might a friend or sibling.

### **5. Model the alternative.**

The next step is to illustrate how they should have addressed you. Model it for them so they know exactly what you mean. No matter how irritated their behavior made you feel, be sure and maintain a helpful demeanor. It's key to ensuring that it doesn't happen again.

### **6. Pause.**

A short pause will give the student a chance to speak if they wish. You'll often get an apology. If you don't, however, or if the student clams up, that's okay. It's not important that they admit their mistake. Your meeting isn't a form of accountability, and it shouldn't be construed as such.

### **7. Make a promise.**

Finish your conversation with a promise that if it happens again, you'll enforce a consequence. By patiently setting the record straight, the student will walk away from your two-minute meeting with a greater appreciation of you and a fuller, more meaningful understanding of respect.

## **Defining Disrespect**

Disrespect appears to be on the rise – particularly among younger students. It's important, however, to determine if [the disrespect is intentional](#) or a misunderstanding of the definition.

Sadly, as surprising as it may seem, due to poor home and neighborhood influences many students just don't know any better. And enforcing consequences for behavior your students don't understand to be wrong will jeopardize your relationship with them.

It will cause friction, distrust, and resentment and increase rather than decrease the chances of it happening again.

The good news is that body language and tone of voice will always tell you whether to enforce a consequence immediately or pull the student aside for a brief lesson.

This underscores the importance of teaching this particular topic thoroughly in the beginning of the school year.

If you model the most likely scenarios – like those above, for example – and define for your students precisely where the line is, then instances of disrespect, intentional or not, will be few and far between.