



How To Hold Difficult Students Accountable

By Michael Linsin on December 10, 2016

Last week, a reader asked a question I've gotten a lot over the years.

"How should I hold difficult students accountable?"

It's a topic I haven't covered specifically because the answer is so simple and direct:

Just like everyone else.

You calmly approach the student. You deliver the news.

"You have a warning for breaking rule number two."

Then you walk away.

It's a way of enforcing consequences *with all students* without causing friction or resentment.

The result is that as long as you've taught your classroom management plan thoroughly, and you're consistent, your students will look inward rather than pointing the finger elsewhere.

They may not be happy about the consequence, but they'll reflect on their misbehavior. They'll take ownership and responsibility and resolve not to make the same mistake again.

But the reader added an interesting twist to his question.

You see, over time he had established a good relationship with his more challenging students and was concerned about disrupting their "growing identity as well-behaved students."

So much so that he was walking on eggshells around them. He was nervous about holding them accountable and damaging the relationship. It's a valid concern.

Because, when a difficult student is **in the midst of transitioning** into the well-behaved student you envision them to be, it's a tenuous time.

One stern lecture or burst of anger from you could send them in the opposite direction.

So, even though you can't go wrong with holding them accountable in the manner described above, there is one thing you can do to ensure that you aren't misunderstood.

There is one thing you can do to safeguard your all-important relationship and send the message that receiving a consequence from you isn't personal.

All it takes is a simple change in phrasing.

As you approach the student, it's important to remember to be especially calm – even pleasant and easygoing. Take a few deep breaths if you have to. There is no hurry.

When you get their attention, make eye contact and say:

"Hey Anthony, I really appreciate how well you've been doing, but I have to give you a warning for breaking rule number two."

You're still delivering your consequence. You're still being clear and consistent. But you're doing it in a way that acknowledges their improvement.

It's a subtle but effective way of communicating that you're just doing your job and that it in no way affects how you feel about them.

The key phrase here is *I have to*.

It reinforces their image of you as a leader to be trusted, as a person of integrity they can count on to do what they say they're going to do.

I've used this strategy hundreds of times and the reaction is almost always the same:

The student will look down, nod their head, and say, *"I understand."* You may also receive an apology, although it usually comes at the end of the day.

Both are proof that **your relationship** remains strong and influential. They show that the student is indeed on the right track and that their improvement is sure to continue.

It's a simple little change, hard to believe it could make much difference.

But for those few students on the cusp of great and enduring change . . .

It can mean the world to them.