



## How To Talk To Difficult Students

Most teachers talk to difficult students too much, because somewhere along the line they've gotten the idea that the more attention they give them, the better teacher they'll be.

So they pull them aside for pep-talks, reminders, and lectures. They warn. They scold. They threaten. They flatter and debate. They micromanage and manipulate.

They spend more time addressing them, conferencing with them, and trying to persuade them to behave than the rest of their class put together.

And for the most part, it's a waste of time.

This doesn't mean that talking with difficult students can't have a positive effect. When done in a certain way, and in the right moments, it most definitely can.

Here's how.

### **Make it infrequent.**

Difficult students have been on the receiving end of near-constant talking-tos for as long as they've been in school. So when they see you coming, with that same familiar look on your face, they roll their eyes. They've

heard it all. To get them to see themselves as capable of following rules like anyone else, you shouldn't touch base with them more than anyone else.

### **Make it honest.**

In a desperate attempt to improve behavior, many teachers will say just about anything to difficult students – regardless of its truthfulness. But trying to coerce students into behaving, particularly while being less than **brutally honest**, doesn't work. Neither does false praise, bribing, or any other form of manipulation. The most effective way to talk to difficult students is to give it to them straight.

### **Make it meaningful.**

The only reason to talk to difficult students about their behavior is to inform or to deepen the meaning of a lesson *already learned*. **Never ask them why** they did this or that. Never force assurances or explanations. Never give them a dressing-down. Let their mistakes and subsequent accountability, or their successes and subsequent good feelings, be the lesson. Don't ruin it, absolve it, or weaken it with your over-involvement.

### **Make it a challenge.**

When a difficult student misbehaves, let your classroom management plan do your talking for you. However, if the right moment strikes, and you know a word or two can provide additional strength and meaning to the lesson, then make it an encouraging challenge. For example, you might cruise by their desk or time-out chair and say simply, "*You're better than this*" or "*I still believe in you.*"

### **Make it wordless.**

When a difficult student does something well or has a particularly good day, it's often best not to say anything at all – which is a startling change when compared to most of his or her former teachers (who'd all but throw a parade). By simply not making a big deal out of them doing what they're supposed to do, what they're expected to do, you send a powerful, behavior-altering message.

### **Make it a gesture.**

If the student has had several good days, or you're convinced they've made real improvement, and not just a brief period of acceptable behavior, then **a simple gesture** like a fist bump or a knowing smile can be most impactful. It can deepen the meaning of a positive lesson already learned. And unlike silly, over-the-top celebrations for moderate improvement, the student's heart will soar – internally, privately, and resoundingly.

### **Make it free of strings.**

Most teachers only talk to difficult students when they want something from them (i.e., improved behavior), which effectively poisons the relationship. To influence their behavior, you have to build mutual, trusting rapport – which only comes with no strings attached. Decide to like and enjoy your most difficult students, **no matter how unlikeable they can be**, so that when you do talk to them about behavior, what you say will pack a punch.

### **Let Them Stand...**

Teachers spend so much **time and attention on difficult students** because it makes them feel like they're doing something, anything, to help improve their behavior. They figure that if they work hard enough on the problem, if they can just somehow come up with the right words to say, they'll be able to turn them around.

But the more attention you give to difficult students, the less attention they'll pay to what you say and the harder it will be to improve their behavior.

So instead of telling them how they should feel, what they should think, and what lessons they should be learning, give them a chance to feel the weight of their mistakes and the inner joy of their successes.

Let them stand on their own two feet.

Then, and only then, will the wellspring of change come bubbling up from the only place it truly can...

From within.