



Why You Should Never Give Choices Instead Of Consequences

By Michael Linsin

Here at Smart Classroom Management we hear from teachers and administrators from all four corners of the globe.

And one of the more perplexing trends in classroom management is to give students choices instead of consequences.

For example:

Let's say a student named Jason is up and walking about your room while the rest of the class is working independently.

He's tapping his pencil on various objects. He's shuffling his feet. And although capable, he's grumbling under his breath that he doesn't want to do his work anymore.

But instead of simply [giving him a warning](#) for breaking a class rule, you negotiate with him.

You try to coax him away from disturbing others by giving him options to choose from.

"Hey Jase, do you want to do just a few problems instead of all of them?"

"How 'bout if you did your work on the rug? Would you like that?"

“Would you prefer to draw a picture instead of writing it out?”

“Why don’t you take a little break and work on your iPad?”

“What about taking a walk down the hall, and getting away for a few minutes?”

“Do you want to be my helper, and do your work another time?”

You get the picture. The idea is to remove the source of his discontentment, to entice him with alternatives so that he will no longer engage in unwanted behavior.

And as long as you’re willing to go far enough (*“Hey, do you want to sit in my chair?”*), the strategy will work. It will indeed stop him from disrupting the class. No doubt about it.

So what’s not to like?

Well, as poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning once wrote so beautifully, “Let me count the ways.”

1. When you appease difficult students by lowering academic or behavioral standards, you send an unmistakable message that they can complain, disrupt, and misbehave their way out of anything they deem unpleasant.
2. Offering choices rewards bad behavior, defiance, selfishness and the like, thus encouraging more frequent and more severe misbehavior. Unless, that is, you continue lowering the bar and sweetening the choices.
3. By giving in so readily, even voluntarily, you’re essentially telling them that you believe they’re incapable of changing their behavior. This is a form of labeling, and it is devastating to difficult students.

4. It's confirmation from an authoritative source that misbehavior isn't just something they do, but it's who they are, like eye color or shoe size, and something they have little control over. Unless this label is reversed, they will continue to misbehave year after year.

5. It's a philosophy that believes that an upset or uncomfortable child is to be avoided at all costs, which not only doesn't reflect the world we live in, but it makes a mockery of the critical role of perseverance and hard work in academic as well as personal success.

6. Offering choices assuages misbehavior in the moment, but does nothing to curb it going forward. In other words, it's a band-aid that sacrifices the child's future for the here and now.

7. When you excuse, enable, and offer escape routes, you set limits on students and their capacity to rise above challenges and overcome difficulties. You lead them away from success, not toward it.

8. Letting students off the hook is akin to telling them they're not good enough or worthy enough to be held to a higher standard, which strips away dignity and self-confidence faster and more effectively than yelling, sarcasm, or any other harmful method.

9. Going back on your word by failing to follow [the rules of your classroom](#) causes resentment and distrust from *all* students and severely limits your ability to lead and build meaningful, influential relationships.

10. Baiting students with more attractive choices creates an environment of entitlement and causes them to react to firm direction and accountability with aggressive push-back.

Yes, They Can

It is possible to temporarily placate difficult students into better behavior.

But the cost is their very future.

It's a shameful strategy that hands leverage and control over to students who frankly don't know what's best for them. Our job is to teach our students how to overcome obstacles, not avoid them with excuses and manipulation.

When you offer choices in exchange for *not* disrupting the class, when you lighten the workload and remove responsibility, you are in every sense giving up on them. You are in every sense telling them that they're not worth holding accountable.

As a result, they come to believe that they're weak-minded and incapable of improvement, incapable of sitting, listening, and learning, and incapable of being anything other than the court jester your words and actions suggest.

It's tragic and demeaning and so, so sad.

The truth is, no matter how difficult a student's home life, no matter how tough they have it, or how emotional and angry they can get when things don't go their way, you do them no favors by letting them off the hook.

You do them no favors by giving in, making excuses, or offering a bunny hill when the rest of the class is testing themselves on K2.

So what's the alternative?

You follow your classroom management plan. You let accountability and [your undying belief in them](#) do their good work.

You let the hard lessons that are part of every well-lived life embolden them to become better, more resilient, and more capable than they themselves ever thought possible.

In other words, instead of offering choices and telling them they can't, give them consequences . . .

And tell them they can.