



## Why You Shouldn't Pep-Talk Difficult Students

The student stands wordlessly, eyes averted, still smarting from yet another backslide as the earnest teacher softens the blows of the student's many transgressions.

Listing positive attributes, offering reassurances, buoying spirits, the teacher seeks the slightest spark of understanding, the slightest recognition indicating that his (or her) pep-talk is hitting its mark, getting through, doing some good.

He cajoles, he praises, he soothes and emotes . . . he all but tap dances around the student with a hat and cane. It's a time-consuming, mentally taxing exercise. But he keeps at it, week after week, because he's been led to believe that with **the right words and inspiration**, he can transform his most challenging students.

It makes sense. It feels right. It should work.

But pulling difficult students aside for pep-talks, particularly in response to recent misbehavior, will not only delay real and lasting improvement, but it can cause behavior to worsen.

Here's why:

### **They've heard it all.**

Most difficult students have a history of misbehavior reaching as far back as preschool. Add the near-constant flow of pep-talks over the years, and you have a group of students who have heard it all. Thus, they've become jaded and adept at tuning you out or telling you what you want to hear. For them, these moments are more embarrassing than they are uplifting.

### **Pep-talks lack meaning.**

Unless a student has taken an improving step of her (or his) own accord, then little of what you say will make a difference — because it lacks basis, proof, or truth and therefore any meaning. It's a sand castle at low tide. A brief acknowledgement based on real improvement, on the other hand, can have remarkable power.

### **You give up your leverage.**

When difficult students see how desperate you are for them to improve, you hand over much of the leverage you need to help them change their ways. Because they know how much it means to you, because they can see it in your eyes and smell it on you from a million miles away, they know they have you over a barrel and can ruin your day whenever they wish.

### **It labels them.**

Whenever you spend **extra time and attention on difficult students**, you're essentially telling them that they're different and less capable. This is a powerful message that reinforces what most difficult students already

believe about themselves. Frequent pep-talks intensify this false belief by communicating one thing above the static of your hyper-encouragement: that misbehavior is who they are and not merely something they have done.

### **Less Attention, More Dignity**

Through all their misbehavior, silliness, and brazen disrespect, most difficult students shuffle through their day with an anvil around their neck.

And pep-talks based primarily on the teacher's desire for a more peaceful classroom only add to their burden, stoking the fires of resentment, pushing them deeper into their shell of scarred differentness, and urging them on to more frequent and more severe misbehavior.

What they need most from you is their dignity.

They need you to allow them to begin feeling like just another member of your classroom. They need the freedom to make mistakes and accept the consequences, the freedom to experience remorse and disappointment, and the freedom to feel the **intrinsic determination** to do and be better – all of their own accord and on their own terms.

So does this mean that you'll never interact with difficult students, that you'll never acknowledge their victories or failures?

Not in the least. Carefully timed, small, private, and subtle moments of truth, in response to lessons *already* learned through fair and

compassionate accountability, or through bona fide steps in improvement, can be life changing.

Eye contact and a nod from across the room, a knowing smile and a fist bump, a note folded over and waiting on their desk . . . these authentic moments between you mean the world to students labeled as “difficult.”

They ring like a bell through the night, penetrating the heart and filling with hope.

Remembered for a lifetime.