

Surface Management Techniques

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Fritz Redl and his colleague David Wineman pioneered some of the early work on effective practices for working with students who exhibit emotional and behavioral problems in classroom settings. Those strategies are as useful and relevant in today's classrooms as Redl and Wineman found them to be in the 1950s and 1960s. Redl's (1966) Techniques for Managing Surface Behavior are listed and described below. These strategies should be among those most frequently used to avoid or defuse classroom conflict and power struggles. The order of the first 11 techniques does not suggest a hierarchy of preference or likelihood of success in any given situation. All 11 techniques should be within a teacher's repertoire and among the strategies selected as a first response given the context and function of a particular child's behavior.

1. Planned ignoring. Mild behaviors that are not being repeated by other students and are not creating undue disturbance to other students are often best managed through planned ignoring. Children tend to repeat behaviors that get attention. By ignoring one behavior, but giving a child attention for a more desirable behavior—especially if the more desirable behavior is incompatible with the behavior being ignored—the teacher increases the likelihood that the behavior being ignored will stop over time. One example is kneeling rather than sitting in a chair. Some students kneel because the chair is not the appropriate size for them. Other students, particularly those with ADHD, kneel or squirm in their chairs because they need to release excess energy. Students can be taught how to sit during a lesson on active listening. Those with ADHD can be taught to wiggle their legs under their desks as an alternative to kneeling and squirming. Teaching students sitting skills and rewarding those behaviors instead of repeatedly reminding them to place their bottoms in their chairs and their feet on the floor is more effective. Behaviors that should not be ignored include physical aggression and loud, disruptive behaviors that interfere with learning.

2. Signal interference. Signal interference is an effective way to communicate with students through the use of nonverbal cues. Students who are not skilled at self-monitoring and self-management often benefit from a predetermined signal. This can be a private cue between the teacher and a particular student or a cue the whole group understands. With younger children it is often effective to wear a laminated card that has a stop sign on one side and a go sign on the other. When the student is performing the desired behaviors, the go sign is visible. If the student begins to exhibit undesired behaviors, the teacher turns the card over to reveal the stop sign. Nothing is said to the child unless he self-corrects. When he self-corrects, the card is turned to reveal the go sign. Praise or some other form of reinforcement might accompany the return to desired behavior, or the go sign might be all the feedback the child needs. I have used tapping my nose, pulling my ear, and pointing to a poster illustrating strategies for self-calming with

older children. Older students, in particular, appreciate not being corrected verbally in front of others. This technique does not interrupt instruction and does not require a large investment in time. It can be an essential step to take during the teaching of self-monitoring as long as the teacher is aware of the need to fade the prompt as the student gains greater self-awareness and self-control.

3. Interest boosting. Sometimes students simply are not interested in a particular topic or lesson format. Teachers can punish those who do not comply with the assigned tasks, but this often escalates conflict and power struggles instead of defusing them. Changing the materials, pace, or tasks can boost students' interest significantly and effectively defuse potential power struggles. For example, many students dread composing sentences and paragraphs. Spending sufficient time with pre-writing activities such as brainstorming topics, making word walls of topic related vocabulary, and completing graphic organizers might help. When it is time to actually spend time with the independent task of writing, however, the teacher can boost students' interest in the task by providing options. Many students will write more if allowed to tape chart paper to the wall and use colored markers. Some prefer to use different colors of construction paper. Others will forget their discomfort or dislike of writing a paragraph if allowed to use a word processor or old typewriter. Bingo and jeopardy type games that reinforce academic content, role plays, hands-on activities, and brief content related videos are also effective as interest boosters. A word of caution should be shared here. Students will complain of being bored or act disinterested in order to access preferred activities. The teacher should carefully monitor students' behaviors so they do not realize that a lesson plan is being modified. Do not announce that plans have changed because of bad behavior.

4. Restructuring, Regrouping. Restructuring or regrouping is useful when the room arrangement or schedule is interfering with optimum student cooperation. Students might not have enough personal space around their desks. Students who do not get along might be assigned to the same instructional skill group. The schedule might require students to spend too much time with passive, non-interactive tasks before being given opportunities to move around and converse with others or might over-stimulate them with too many active, less structured tasks during a period of the day. Restructuring and regrouping can occur as soon as a problem arises or can be accomplished through more thorough planning after collecting data and reflecting on students' needs.

5. Proximity control. Sometimes the presence of an authority figure is all a person needs to become aware of a behavior and self-correct. Police officers who park within clear view of motorist are exercising proximity control. They do not flash their lights, sound their sirens, or call undue attention to themselves. They are simply present and within range of taking additional measures if the need arises. Proximity control in the classroom works much the same way. The teacher moves closer to a student who is showing signs of distress or beginning to act

inappropriately. The teacher does not comment on the behavior, touch the child, or speak directly to the child. The teacher is simply present and available if the need arises. Many children will refrain from misbehaving in a classroom that is constantly monitored in this fashion. Others will become aware of their behavior and self-correct as the teacher gets nearer to their desks. The child who acts inappropriately to get the teacher's attention will not benefit from proximity control, because this strategy may actually reinforce the undesired behavior. Planned ignoring paired with attention to an incompatible behavior would be more appropriate and effective in this case.

6. Antiseptic bouncing. Some students are not aware of their increasing levels of anxiety, frustration, or need for physical or sensory stimulation. They often persist at a task or engage in a conversation with a peer that overwhelms their limited capacity for self-control. An alert teacher can defuse the situation by providing the child with a brief respite from the situation by asking the child to run an errand or help with a simple classroom chore. This can be a particularly useful strategy to use when one student is being teased by another student. The potential victim can be asked to take a note to a neighboring classroom or sort construction paper scraps in the art center by color while the teacher deals discretely with the student who was initiating the teasing. This gives the potential victim a respectable avenue for escape from the situation and provides time for other corrective actions to be taken. For students with ADHD or anxiety disorders, the need for increased movement and a break from a tedious academic task can be built into the routine of the classroom through classroom jobs as well as materials arrangement that requires frequent and controlled movement around the room. Examples include: (a) class jobs such as distributing books and papers, filing papers, collating papers, or cutting, stacking, and stapling scrap paper; (b) requiring students to move clothespins from a line on one side of the room to another across the room as they complete assignments; and (c) providing targeted students with an individual desk and a chair at a group table. The students with an individual desk and a chair at a group table would be able to move back and forth between the two options as their needs dictated. Neither assigned seat would be designated as a place of reward or punishment. Both places would simply be available and utilized as the student's needs dictated throughout the day.

7. Hurdle help. Sometimes a student signals distress by tapping a pencil, sighing, or beginning to crumple a paper. Offering assistance and support before the student refuses to complete the task or makes threatening comments can be effective in avoiding a power struggle. If the student is already upset enough to make "You can't make me!" type statements, offering choices that boost the student's interest can be enough to defuse the situation. When offering choices related to consequences, be careful to state the positives first. Reminding a student who is already upset about a potential aversive consequence usually escalates the student's anger and anxiety. Start by reminding the student of positive consequences that will follow the completion of the task.

8. Tension decontamination (Humor). The use of humor can be difficult to manage well in the beginning. Students who do not know and trust the person who makes a joke about a potentially upsetting situation can easily be perceived as mocking or being disrespectful to the students. Once students know and trust a teacher, however, humor can be quite effective in reducing tension and restoring everyone's willingness to cooperate. During an affective lesson on the role of thoughts and emotions in making choices about behavior, Brad began to get off task. We had been experimenting with different types of balls to determine which ones would bounce the highest when dropped from a height of 5 feet. The class decided that the material from which each ball was made determined how high it would bounce. They agreed that the balls had no control over their performance. When I asked why this was true, one young man said, "They only have air inside. They do not have brains." I agreed enthusiastically and asked the 7, 8, and 9 year olds to raise their hands if they had brains. Everyone raised his hand except Brad. I asked Brad if he had a brain. He said, "No." I asked what was in his head. He replied, "I don't have a brain, I have a squirrel." Brad liked to entertain the class and get them off topic, so I quickly asked, "Well, Brad, does your squirrel have a brain?" Brad and the others in the class laughed. He agreed that the squirrel did have a brain, and we went on to discuss how our ability to think and feel emotions effected the choices we made about our behavior. Stopping the lesson to reprimand Brad would have likely resulted in Brad encouraging others to name animals in their heads and a performance of Brad's interpretation of squirrel-like behavior. Brad enjoyed the joke he started and rejoined the discussion appropriately with a quick, humorous response to his potentially disruptive comment.

9. Diversion. When children are very young, skilled parents divert their attention to avoid tears. A noisy rattle is offered as a substitute for an electrical cord. A game of peek-a-boo is played while the parent packs the car to keep the baby from crying every time the parent's head disappears into the trunk. As children get older, diverting their attention takes more thought and skill, but can still be a powerful strategy for avoiding or defusing conflict. Roy was a fifth grade student who had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. When Roy believed he was in danger, he became extremely violent. One afternoon he ran out of the classroom after an argument with a classmate. I followed him into the office where he had cornered the guidance counselor. She was sitting at a desk while Roy held a pair of scissors over her head. I knew that any loud noises or sudden movements could precipitate an attack on the guidance counselor, so I moved slowly toward Roy and talked in soothing tones about making a bird out of a piece of paper. As I began to fold a piece of typing paper from the desk, Roy shifted his eyes from the guidance counselor to me. He continued to hold the scissors over her head, but became distracted by my story about the bird. When it was finished, I showed him how to make the wings flap by pulling on the bird's tail. He nodded approval. At that point, I asked him if he wanted the bird. Again he nodded affirmatively. I said, "I'll trade you the scissors for the bird." Without a word, Roy handed me the scissors. I placed the bird in his hand and asked him to walk with me to the behavior specialist's office. He led the way without another incident.

Attempting to control the situation in any other manner might have ended in serious injury to the guidance counselor, Roy, and myself.

A much less dramatic example from personal experience occurred when a third grader crumpled his paper into a ball during a science lesson. This was his way of signaling his anger and frustration. Cursing and throwing classroom items usually followed. On this particular day, however, I quickly thanked him for the crumpled ball of paper and used it in a demonstration of mass. He was so intrigued with the science demonstration that he refocused his attention without further intervention.

10. Removal of seductive objects. Seductive items include things that distract students and disrupt the classroom routine. Toys and broken equipment are at the top of the list in any classroom. Young, immature students, however, will be distracted by anything that isn't immediately required to complete a task. They will play with crayons, markers, erasers, bits of scrap paper, scissors, rulers, and other common school tools. Keep unnecessary supplies and instructional items in a cabinet when not in use. Provide students with limited choices initially and make more items available as the students' abilities to manage those items increases. Remove instructional supplies that will not be used and broken equipment from the room. Keep furniture and items that can be easily thrown to a minimum. Disallow toys and electronic games from home. If the school encourages students to bring such items from home for Fun Friday activities or Show and Tell, designate a secure file cabinet or storage cabinet for such items. Students should only have access to those items during designated periods of the day.

11. Direct appeal. With all the emphasis on Functional Behavioral Assessments and Positive Behavior Support Plans, we sometimes forget to just ask the student to stop a problem behavior. Behaviors that are frequently exhibited will not come under control through direct appeal. A behavior that is relatively mild and rarely exhibited can often be brought under control simply by making the student aware of the behavior and its effects on others. A privately communicated, quiet, calm, and firm reprimand often attains the desired results without additional time or effort.

12. Physical restraint. Physical restraint should be used only as a last resort. Children who have been abused may re-experience the fear and anxiety they felt during an abuse situation. Others might not have histories of abuse, but might feel additional anger and embarrassment over their lack of control. In addition, physical restraint can result in injury to the student or other staff members. Every attempt should be made to defuse a situation with verbal, non-aggressive de-escalation strategies. If restraint is determined to be the best option, remove the audience and call for support. Do not attempt to restrain a child without prior training. Do document the restraint, contact parents or guardians, and notify a supervisor.

13. Offer Choices: State the positive choice(s) first. Provide time for the student to process the choices. Do not pressure the student to make an immediate decision.