



The 5 Faces of Passive-Aggressive Behavior in School

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Introduction

Signe Whitson has spent the better part of two decades working with young people and their families, helping kids manage anger and all kinds of related mental health issues. So she's had ample opportunities to see what a destructive force anger can be. When anger is expressed in uncontrolled, expressive ways, it gets our attention right away. But that same anger can be highly controlled and hidden in behaviors, which are the hallmarks of passive aggression—and the classroom setting is often the first place where young people tend to display this type of behavior.

In this free resource, Whitson breaks down five common “faces” of passive aggressive behavior in the classroom—not only the signature behaviors, but examples of events that can drive them, so you can learn to identify the environments in which passive aggressive behavior can fester. At the end of this eBook, we'll supply you with a starter kit of resources to begin constructively responding to these behaviors so that you can not only help protect your classroom from the dangers of passive aggressive behavior, but you can help the students displaying these behaviors avoid continuing to resort to them in adulthood.

Taking the time to explore the manifestations and origins of passive aggressive behavior in the classroom can help you cultivate a more supportive and productive learning environment. It can also help you identify more constructive methods of addressing this type of behavior in your own life as an adult. As you read through each of the five personas Whitson presents, think about your own experiences with this type of behavior, and how it impacted the culture of your classroom.

Most importantly, this guide will help you to remember that behind each behavior is a person—a person who needs your guidance on how express difficult emotions and cope with frustration in a healthier, more constructive way.

Once a teacher becomes aware of these troubling dynamics, however, they become well-equipped to maintain emotional neutrality and manage their responses to skillfully connect with the passive-aggressive student.

In this resource, Whitson describes typical school-based passive-aggressive patterns through which students succeed in frustrating their teachers (winning the battle) but ultimately damaging their own school experience (losing the war.)

Pattern 1:

Temporary Compliance

In this pattern of passive-aggressive behavior, students verbally comply with an authority figure's directive, but behaviorally delay carrying out the request.

EXAMPLE

Lily is a second grader who loves Art but dislikes her regular classroom lessons. When her teacher instructs the class to begin putting away their art supplies in order to begin Social Studies, Lily acknowledges her teacher with a nod, but continues to work on her collage. Even when all of her classmates are lined up and ready to move on to the next class period, Lily is still slowly putting the cap on her glue bottle and painstakingly placing her scissors in their case. She dilly-dallies through her teacher's multiple prompts to clean up and insists, "I'm coming" so many times that her classmates begin to giggle. Finally, her exasperated teacher loses control and lashes out against Lily in front of the whole class. "Ha!" Lily thinks to herself. "Now you know how I feel about having to stop my art project before I am finished with it."





Pattern 2:

Intentional Inefficiency

Students acting out this pattern of passive-aggressive behavior behaviorally comply with an unwanted task, but carry it out at a purposefully substandard level.

EXAMPLE

James is a high school sophomore who excelled in Science and Math but strongly disliked anything to do with writing. During his Creative Writing class, he took pleasure in finding new ways to violate the spirit of his teacher's assignments, while still following the letter of her law. When his teacher assigned a 10-page, typed, double-spaced essay on time travel, James handed in a paper with exactly 20 words on it—two per page, typed, with a blank line between each of the words on the page. For the next assignment, the teacher added a word count to her specifications. James met the word count, filling his essay with wild vocabulary words and long strings of adjectives to meet the 1000-word standard exactly. Each time his teacher would confront James about his under-performance, James would insist, "What? I followed the rules exactly. You're just picking on me. Beside, this IS Creative Writing class and I WAS being creative."

Pattern 3:

Letting a Problem Escalate

In this pattern, a young person expresses anger at an authority figure in the school by making a conscious decision not to act, even when his action could prevent a problem from occurring. I often call this pattern of passive-aggressive behavior a crime of omission, for it is what a student consciously chooses not to do that creates a problem.

EXAMPLE

Thirteen-year-old Silas is angry at his Spanish teacher, Mrs. Robinson, for confiscating his cell phone during class. At the end of the period, Silas is walking behind Mrs. Robinson in the hall when he sees his teacher's phone fall out of the briefcase. "Mrs. Robinson!" he calls out impulsively. When his teacher turns around, Silas stops short, smiles, and says, "Ummm, I was just wondering when I could get my phone back." He continues to engage Mrs. Robinson until they are both all the way down the hall, far away from the scene of the crime of omission.



Pattern 4:

Hidden but Conscious Revenge

This pattern of passive-aggressive behavior occurs when a student has hostile feelings toward a teacher and makes a very deliberate decision to get back at him/her at a later time.

EXAMPLE

Mandy loved computers, but hated her Computers teacher. She perceived him as rude when he directed her to stay on task with her classmates instead of moving ahead at her own pace. After studying the basics of website design in class, Mandy decided on a perfect way to show her teacher how much she actually could stay on a task. She built a small website dedicated to him. Using a real photo from the yearbook and tons of false, embarrassing information, she published the site online and anonymously publicized it around the school. Her teacher was humiliated in front of the student body and had to defend against the untrue postings when confronted by school administrators. Mandy enjoyed the drama from her safe distance. Recognizing the impact of this first website, she realized the potential for building others related to classmates she did not favor.



Pattern 5: Self-Depreciation

This pattern of passive-aggressive behavior is considered the most pathological, in that a young person conveys her covert anger in ways that hurt others, but also have long-term, negative consequences for herself.

EXAMPLE

Pippa was a bright, artistic high school senior. She was the youngest of three children and the daughter of two medical doctors. Everyone else in her family had an Ivy League education and this was the path her family assumed she would travel on as well. Pippa wanted to attend art school rather than a traditional university, but her parents said they would not pay for anything other than a traditional academic education. Pippa was furious, but felt she had no power to verbally dissent. She consented to her parents' wishes and applied to all of the Ivy League universities. Little did her parents realize, however, that Pippa sabotaged each and every application, describing in her essays how much she despised each school and was only applying because her parents forced her to do so. Sure enough, spring came and Pippa found herself with eight rejection letters from the Ivy Leagues and no feasible plan for attending any university in the fall. Suddenly, art school seemed like a good plan to her parents...



Passive-aggressive behavior is often a response to a young person feeling as though his life will only get worse if he expresses his anger directly.

While the choice to behave with sugarcoated hostility often feels satisfying to the young person in the moment, in the long term this indirect style of communication isolates the child from sources of adult support.

This resource is designed to help you recognize the red flags of passive-aggressive behavior. When you're willing and able to look beyond behavior and recognize the anger that can drive students, you're in the best position to meaningfully connect with young people and eventually re-direct their passive-aggressive behaviors to more emotionally honest, [assertive anger expression](#).

More Information

Now that you know how to identify these behaviors, it's time to start managing them when they appear in your classroom. This toolkit organizes evidence-based strategies and approaches, including more instruction from expert Signe Whitson, to help you start proactively addressing passive-aggressive behavior.

Free CPI On-Demand Session: How to Manage Passive-Aggressive Behavior in Your Classroom

<https://youtu.be/fugjt1X7WTs>

Signe Whitson, the author of this eBook, goes in-depth with CPI's senior training advisor, Dr. Randy Boardman, Ed.D., to explain proven strategies for addressing passive-aggressive behavior. She discusses the best ways to respond at each of the five levels of passive-aggressive behavior, supported with evidence from her ongoing work with Dr. Nicholas Long at the Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) Institute, where she is chief operating officer.

Read *The Angry Smile*

<https://www.crisisprevention.com/Products/The-Angry-Smile-Book>

This book goes beyond the on-demand presentation to explore in greater detail the psychology of passive-aggressive behavior in children and adults—and it provides evidence-based, effective skills in handling these behaviors wherever you may encounter them—at home, at school, or at work.

Get Your Staff Trained With This Three-Hour Interactive Online Course

<https://www.crisisprevention.com/Products/The-Angry-Smile-Online-Course>

Developed by Dr. Nicholas Long and Signe Whitson and based upon their book, *The Angry Smile*, you and your staff will truly benefit from The Angry Smile training course—it's facilitated in a flexible online format, is packed with multimedia case studies, and includes a downloadable course manual, a study guide, and an assessment test to ensure you've thoroughly covered the nine modules of content, which include:

- The development of pathways to a passive-aggressive personality.
- Reasons people use passive-aggressive behavior.
- The five levels of passive-aggressive behavior.
- The Passive-Aggressive Conflict Cycle.
- Eight skills for effectively responding to passive aggressive behavior.
- Six steps for changing passive-aggressive behavior in the long term.

Thank You!

We hope you found this resource helpful. Please feel free to share it with a friend or colleague.

HAVE QUESTIONS? WE CAN HELP!

Give us a call at **888.426.2184** or email info@crisisprevention.com



ABOUT SIGNE WHITSON

Signe Whitson is a licensed social worker, [school counselor](#), author, and speaker with more than 15 years of experience working with kids and families. She presents customized workshops for professionals, parents, and students on topics related to [understanding and ending bullying](#), managing anger in children, changing passive-aggressive behavior, and crisis intervention in schools and treatment organizations. Signe is the Chief Operating Officer of the [Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute](#), a professional training and certification program for turning crisis situations into learning opportunities for children and youth with chronic patterns of self-defeating behaviors.

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ABOUT CPI

CPI equips organizations with training and resources on preventing and de-escalating difficult behavior. [Nonviolent Crisis Intervention](#)® training helps you reduce risk and injuries, improve staff retention, comply with legislative mandates, and more. With training tailored to your organization's unique needs, you can implement classroom management techniques that improve school safety and help students stay orderly, focused, and productive.

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