



The 30 Second Intervention



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Strip out all the “magic” systems, reward catalogs, funky behavior data tracking software that now seems to accompany behavior in many schools and you are left with what really matters—real conversations with angry children at the point of crisis. It is these moments that lie at the heart of good behavior and relationship management. It is these moments that are the difference between calm and chaos, confrontation and compliance, inclusion and exclusion.

When children dig their heels in and tell you with passion that “It’s rubbish; I won’t do it and you can’t make me!” it is not just your behavior management skills that are being tested, it is your values, your emotional resilience, and your humanity that are under the microscope. Interrupt and disrupt thought patterns quickly and efficiently to become an expert at defusing behavior bombs that others allow to explode.

The longer each negotiation around behavior takes for the few, the less time you can give to the many. Children who behave badly in class will inevitably need more of your time outside of lessons. Don’t give it to them in class too. Limit your formal one-to-one intervention for poor behavior in class to 30 seconds each time. Get in, deliver the message, “anchor” their behavior with an example of the child’s previous good behavior, and get out with your dignity and the child’s dignity intact. That is the “win-win.”

The 30 second intervention demands careful, often scripted language. The idea is simple. The performance takes practice. The 30 second intervention is not designed to force a child to play “good puppy,” beg for forgiveness, and turn their life around before break time. It is a carefully planned, utterly predictable, and safe way to send a clear message to the child. “You own your behavior. Your poor behavior does not deserve my time. You are better than the behavior you are showing today (and I can prove it).”

The moment you deliver a sanction is the moment that confrontation/complaint/protest will emerge. Counter this defensive response in your 30 second intervention by immediately reminding the child of a previous example of their personal discipline. "Do you remember yesterday/last week when you helped me tidy up/led the group/gave me that excellent homework? Remember mom's face when she got the note? That is the person I know—that is the Chelsea I need to see today." Then use "Thank you for listening" as an excuse to move away and leave the child to their choice. Walk away. Don't turn back. Even if you have just perfectly performed the 30 second intervention, the child may need time to make a choice, time to get back to work, and time for other children to turn their attention away.

As you walk away, Chelsea will be busy baiting a hook to fish you back. Her bait box is full of tasty teacher triggers: a loud swearsy mutter, perhaps the classic "finger," or the utterly disrespectful teeth kissing coupled with quietly insulting murmurs. Don't be tempted to take the bait. Keep walking. The rest of the class will realize that you didn't let it go soon enough. If you rush back in to confront the secondary behaviors, you pass control over to the child. You have lost. A full-blown confrontation is the ultimate reward for the child who likes to provoke. All your hard work is soon undone as the emotions accelerate to swearsy, door-slamming, report-writing segregation cell nastiness.

Of course, as you walk away, your first job is to write down, discreetly, what just happened so that you can speak to the child when everyone is calm. You might prefer to wait until the cold light of the morning to share the note you made with the child. In my experience, a blurry-faced teenager gives an apology and shows regret with more ease. Teenagers fully awake and fueled with sugar or caffeine can be trickier beasts. In time, the certainty of your follow-up soon ripples through the rest of the class. "He'll get you; he won't do anything now, but he'll get you."

A pointy finger, looming presence, or sarcastic tone will undermine the technique. Everything about your physical and tonal approach must say, "I haven't come here for an argument." Pull up a chair or get on your knees. Take away every nuance of anger, every drop of anger fuel that some children crave. Strip out the negative reinforcements and leave the child feeling that they can have control of their behavior themselves.

With a 30 second intervention, you no longer need to improvise. The script is set, the pace predetermined, and the arc of the intervention fine-tuned. The brevity of the intervention affords no time for the gradual crescendo of the improvised castigation. Neither is it driven by big sticks and heavy punishment. It leaves the child thinking about their actions, knowing that someone important believes they are better. At the pivotal point of behavior management, you can address difficult behavior while leaving your relationship perfectly intact.

Performing the 30 second intervention well is truly skillful behavior and emotion management. It takes a great deal of self-control to stop your emotions from creeping out. Reminding children of their good behavior in the middle of dealing with their poor behavior takes practice. Matching humility and certainty takes some emotional resilience on your part. Yet when everyone sees that poor behavior is no longer rewarded, and that interventions are quick, efficient, and predictable, the classroom becomes a safer and less explosive place to learn.



Listen to the
podcast on scripted
interventions here:
bit.ly/scripted-intervention

10 STEPS TO CERTAINTY

1. When children escalate, take them back to the original behavior before you deal with the secondary behavior.
2. Display agreed consistencies in the classroom.
3. Manage escalating inappropriate behavior with an emotionless, scripted response.
4. Use phone calls home and positive notes to reinforce your positive certainty, even in the most inconsistent homes.
5. Map rules, routines, learning habits, and rituals for individuals and specific activities that are becoming difficult to manage.
6. Have a clear tariff for appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Send it home to parents and be prepared to concede when you have had a bad day and don't apply it correctly.
7. Refer to "certainty" when you are speaking to children about their behavior: "If you choose to stay on task throughout this activity, you can be certain that I will catch you and give you praise and reward. If you choose to ignore the routine/make a house under the desk/eat Charlene's eraser, you can be certain that we will be having a different conversation."
8. Don't judge yourself too harshly when you fall off the wagon and behave inconsistently. Apologize and get back to your consistent habits and routines.
9. Resist the temptation to deal with minor indiscretions with high-level sanctions. In effect, you are crying wolf. When you really need support for behavior that warrants a high-level sanction, colleagues may not be so keen.
10. Aim to deliver and execute sanctions on the same day so that every child can start each day with a clean sheet.

PIVOTAL EDUCATION: OUR VALUES AND ETHOS

Pivotal Education are the leading behavior management training consultants in the UK. We provide exceptional training for schools, colleges, and educational institutions, helping thousands through periods of crisis and major institutional changes.

We work with adults to create a positive behavior culture that benefits the whole school environment, shaping adults' behavior to reach a level of consistency that most learners will have never experienced.

The Five Pillars of Practice underpin everything we do:

1. Consistent, calm adult behavior
2. First attention for best conduct
3. Relentless routines
4. Scripting difficult interventions
5. Restorative follow-up

Use the Pivotal Approach to increase attendance and reduce detentions, exclusions, and referrals to senior leaders. Prevent escalation of poor behavior, improve learning outcomes, and save time.

We believe consistent, calm adult behavior provides the foundation upon which genuine and long-lasting behavioral change grows.

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