

Classroom management practice guide

Responding to disengaged and disruptive behaviours

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Effective classroom management creates safe and supportive learning environments for all students. This practice guide is part of a suite of foundational resources for beginning teachers, teachers working in new environments, or experienced teachers who want to refine or refresh specific elements of their classroom management practice. They can be used to individually reflect on and refine one's own practice, or as shared resources to support mentoring and other collaborative and whole-school approaches to improving classroom management.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s guidance is based on a synthesis of the most rigorous and relevant research evidence and guidance on classroom management from a wide range of research experts and expert practitioners across Australia and internationally.

This practice guide will support you to respond to behaviours associated with disengagement and disruption to maintain a safe and supportive learning environment for all students, and support students to focus on their learning. Positive learning environments are created when teachers establish and maintain positive teacher–student relationships and proactively teach, model, revise and reinforce the expected behaviours, routines and rules with their students. In a positive learning environment, expected behaviours are recognised, encouraged and reinforced using acknowledgement and praise.

While proactive classroom management is a preventative strategy, at times, for a range of reasons, students will demonstrate disengaged and disruptive behaviours. The aim of any intervention is to support student safety and focus on learning. Any response to disengaged or disruptive behaviour needs to focus on reminding students of the behaviour expectations or teaching students the skills needed to achieve these.

Goss et al. (2017) define **disengaged behaviour** as passive compliance, including passive disengagement, with little or sporadic engagement in learning, such as sitting quietly but not listening to the teacher, half-completion of tasks and requiring reminders to get work done.

They define **disruptive behaviour** as low-level actions that impact negatively on teaching and other students' learning, such as calling out, interrupting others, being restless, getting out of seats and not following the teacher's instructions.

To manage disengaged and disruptive behaviours:

1. Monitor all students.
2. Use a non-verbal correction.
3. Use a verbal correction.
4. Give a choice.
5. Implement the consequence.

Responding to disengaged and disruptive behaviours requires several skills: acknowledgement and praise, circulation, clear communication, deliberately pausing, non-verbal correction, scanning and voice control.

Always interact with students with a calm tone, respect and politeness – for example, greeting students on first encounter and completing instructions with 'Thank you'. Positively frame communication, stating what students need to do rather than what they don't (that is, avoid using words like 'no' and 'don't'). This models respectful and polite interactions for students and creates a positive and supportive learning environment.

It's important to use responses that support students to correct the behaviour not meeting expectations and re-focus on their learning. Students will often respond to a non-verbal or verbal correction, but sometimes it will take a combination or escalation of responses to correct behaviour and support students to re-engage in their learning.

Knowing your students and how they react in different contexts, and having planned and prepared responses will support you to intervene effectively. While student behaviour may be directed at you or feel personal and emotionally challenging, the most effective responses are enacted in calm and respectful ways, with prepared and rehearsed responses aimed at minimising disruptions to learning.

It's important to consider how your individual and the school's collective perspectives, cultures and identities have shaped your expectations, and whether there's alignment between school, home and community. This can help you consider why behaviours might be occurring, prompt meaningful conversations to understand and consider families' and the community's views to develop a shared understanding of school and classroom expectations, and provide the additional support students may need to be successful.

Effectively responding to disengaged and disruptive behaviours

1. Monitor all students

Consistently monitoring all students demonstrates that you're aware of what's happening in your classroom, will provide support to students when needed and will reinforce behaviour expectations.

Monitor all students by regularly using a combination of pausing, scanning and circulating. Assist students when needed. Acknowledge students meeting behaviour expectations and praise students exceeding behaviour expectations specific to them.

2. Use a non-verbal correction

Effective non-verbal corrections allow you to address disengaged and disruptive behaviours when they first arise without interrupting the flow of the lesson. They're quick and often less intrusive than other responses.

If students' behaviour is not meeting expectations, redirect their behaviour with a non-verbal correction:

- **Proximity** – positioning yourself near the students.
- **Deliberately pausing** – stopping what you're doing to draw the students' attention to you and what they should be doing.
- **'The look'** – turning and looking at the students combined with a gesture – for example, shaking your head, then nodding when they correct themselves, or pointing to your eye and then pointing and looking at where they should be looking.
- **A gesture** to communicate the expected behaviour – for example, putting your finger to your lips or pretending to write.

Combining a deliberate pause with proximity, ‘the look’ or a gesture is powerful in helping to address disengaged and disruptive behaviours. Students will notice you’re aware of their behaviour and will likely respond with a positive change.

Give the students time and space to respond to the non-verbal correction and acknowledge them correcting their behaviour (for example, thumbs up, ‘Thank you’ or a smile). This positive interaction helps maintain connections with the students while correcting their behaviour.

It’s important to note that some students may not understand or respond positively to some subtle non-verbal corrections and will need clearer verbal corrections. Taking the time to teach students expected responses to non-verbal corrections may reduce the need for more intrusive responses over time.

3. Use a verbal correction

Verbal corrections aim to address students’ disengaged or disruptive behaviour by reminding them of expectations and allowing them time and space to respond positively and re-engage with their learning.

Verbal correction should be done with minimal disruption to the flow and pace of a lesson. First, acknowledge students demonstrating the expected behaviour and deliberately pause to allow students not demonstrating the expected behaviour to correct their behaviour. If the behaviour is not corrected, use a verbal correction:

- **Private correction** at an appropriate time that doesn’t interrupt the flow of the lesson – for example, when students are engaging in independent tasks or pair or group discussions. Crouch down beside the student and, using clear communication, a calm, non-threatening tone and a quiet voice, check if they misunderstand something about what they need to do. If the disengagement or disruption is due to misunderstanding, remind them to gain your attention next time they don’t understand so you can give them the support they need. Address the misunderstanding.

If the behaviour is not related to a misunderstanding, remind them of the expectations or instructions. Identify the behaviour they were demonstrating, what they need to do to correct it and why. Acknowledge when they correct their behaviour.

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| 1. State the expected behaviour | ‘[Student name], it’s important that you are looking at me and listening so that you understand what you need to do...’ |
| 2. State what they were doing | ‘...You were trying to get [Name]’s attention when I was explaining the task...’ |
| 3. Re-state the expected behaviour | ‘...Look at me and listen so that you know what you need to do. Thank you.’ |

It’s important that quiet, positive interactions with individual students regularly occur in your classroom, such as helping them and privately acknowledging or praising their behaviour. This helps to build connections with students and enables you to give a private correction to disengaged or disruptive behaviour without highlighting it to others. Be mindful of your position when interacting with students, ensuring you can still scan the whole class.

- **Quick group or whole-class reminder of expectations** using clear communication and an assertive voice. Provide students with a short reminder of the expected behaviour. Allow time and space for students to action the correction and acknowledge when the behaviour expectation is met.

‘Can we all make sure we’re using the equipment to complete the maths activity only.’ *[Pause, scan and acknowledge those who’ve followed the direction.]* ‘Thank you.’

- **Anonymous correction** using clear communication and voice control to state the expected behaviour and identify that there are students not meeting it. Allow the students time and space to action the correction and acknowledge when the behaviour expectation is met.

‘Thank you to those students who are facing the front, looking and listening.’ *[Pause and scan.]* ‘I can see 2 people whose attention is not with us yet.’ *[Pause and acknowledge those who have followed the direction.]* ‘Thank you.’

- **Quick correction**, using clear communication and voice control to provide the students with a short identification of the expected behaviour. Allow the students time and space to correct their behaviour and acknowledge when the behaviour expectation is met.

‘[Student name], focusing on your own work.’ *[Pause and acknowledge the student making the correction.]* ‘Thank you [Student].’

In some instances, you may need to provide a prompt for the students to engage in the positive learning behaviour – for example, ‘Show me [state expected behaviour]. Thank you’.

After using a verbal correction, allow the students time and space to demonstrate the positive expected behaviours. Acknowledge when the behaviour expectation is met to reinforce the expected behaviours and support the learning of that behaviour while also maintaining a positive relationship with the students.

4. Give a choice

Some students may not respond positively to non-verbal and verbal corrections and continue to engage in disengaged or disruptive behaviour. A choice can function as a prompt for both the positive alternative behaviour the student should be engaging in and the help you can offer. It’s also a signal of the consequence if the prompt is not followed.

When disengaged or disruptive behaviour continues following non-verbal and verbal correction, it’s important to briefly consider why the student is behaving in this way and what might be contributing to their behaviour:

- Is the student moving away from something (for example, work, peers, staff, etc.) or towards something (for example, preferred items, the attention of peers and staff, etc.)?
- Is there is a skill gap that needs supporting (for example, task-related, class expectation or social skill, etc.)?
- Is there something you’ve brought to the situation to contribute to their disengaged or disruptive behaviour (for example, Did you get straight into teaching without checking in with the student after break? Did you correct their behaviour and not another student’s similar behaviour?)?

Briefly considering the cause of the behaviour will help you select supports and identify consequences that better match the student's needs, do not reinforce the behaviour, and reduce the likelihood of escalating the situation and making the problem worse.

The student should be given the choice to:

1. correct their behaviour themselves
2. receive support
3. receive a consequence.

Choices should be given, not as an ultimatum or threat, but to correct and discourage the disengaged or disruptive behaviour, and support re-engagement and participation.

Consequences are a necessary component of teaching and reinforcing the expected behaviours for learning. They act as a deterrent and support in managing disengaged and disruptive behaviours. They can serve as reminders of the expectations, allow for more specific instruction away from sources of distraction or influence, as well as support more targeted skill building. Consequences may include:

- moving desks and seats away from the distraction or those being disrupted
- having the student put a distracting or disruptive item on your desk
- completing unfinished work at another time
- speaking with you at break, practising the expected behaviours, such as gaining your attention to ask for help, and planning support for future lessons, such as using a break card to take a quick break or using a visual to indicate help is needed.

Unreasonable consequences that aren't related to the behaviour, explained to the student or applied consistently may lead to disengaged or disruptive behaviour escalating and damage to the relationship with the student due to a sense of unfairness. These might include consequences that are excessive in duration, excessive in the amount of additional work required or explained in an impolite, disrespectful way.

Avoiding disruption to the lesson flow and as privately as possible, clearly communicate the choice to the student in a calm, respectful tone (that is, not sarcastic or intimidating) and with non-threatening body language (that is, not standing over the student but instead moving to their level, side-on and not invading their personal space).

1. **Try to identify the cause of the behaviour and offer support if required** – 'What is it that you need to talk with [Name] about?', 'What is this question asking you to do?' or 'What are you going to write here?'
Support the student as required if the cause is identifiable.
2. **State the expected behaviour and the impact on others and themselves of the disengaged or disruptive behaviour** – '[Student name], focus on completing your learning task, please. Talking to the person next to you interrupts both of your learning.'
3. **State the consequence should they not correct their behaviour** – 'If you continue to talk, you'll need to move to the empty desk. Anything not completed will need to be done at break time and for homework.'

Once the options are given, allow the student time and space to make their choice.

If the student decides to make the positive choice, acknowledge this – for example, ‘Thank you for moving to a place where you are able to focus.’

5. Implement the consequence

Part of developing trusting relationships is students knowing that you’ll follow through on what you say. Consequences are only effective if consistently applied to disengaged or disruptive behaviour. If you say a consequence will happen if a student continues their disengaged or disruptive behaviour, it’s important that you implement it.

Consequences to common disengaged and disruptive behaviours should be explained to students when establishing expectations, routines and rules, giving examples for certain behaviours. Ideally, consequences are part of a consistent school-wide approach and aligned with the values and desired outcomes of the school community.

A consequence should be implemented respectfully and as privately as possible to support and maintain the student’s dignity and the teacher–student relationship. It should also avoid unnecessary attention being drawn to the situation to minimise disruption to the rest of the class.

1. **State the behaviour** – ‘[Student name], you’ve continued to talk to [Name] rather than complete your task.’
2. **Implement the consequence** – ‘Move to the empty desk, please.’

Allow the student time and space to follow your instruction. Move away to avoid escalation through physical presence and use a combination of circulation and scanning to monitor the student, while also monitoring the rest of the class. After a short period, check that the student has responded, or understands when they’re required to complete the consequence.

3. **Acknowledge the decision they’ve made to re-engage in learning and positively reaffirm the appropriate behaviour** – ‘Thank you for moving and focusing on your learning. What question do you now need to answer?’

If the student refuses to follow your directions at this point, follow your school’s behaviour procedure to seek additional support.

Rehearse and practise responding to disengaged and disruptive behaviours

Use the checklist for each step in the following section to identify your strengths and to prioritise the step you'll focus on first for rehearsal and practice. Focus on one step at a time until you can confidently demonstrate each item on the checklist.

Script and rehearse without students present. Consider filming your rehearsal and using the relevant checklist to review the recording yourself or with a colleague.

Then practise with students present. Record and review your practice alone or with a colleague using the relevant checklist, making sure to follow school or employer policies regarding recording students.

Invite a colleague to observe your responses to disengaged and disruptive behaviours in action. Ask them to use the checklists to provide feedback on what went well and to suggest one area for further improvement.

1. Monitor all students

Rehearse, then practise:

a strategic position where you can see all students

deliberately pausing in your strategic position

scanning combined with deliberately pausing

circulating the classroom to:

- support students requiring clarification of an instruction or extra assistance
- acknowledge students meeting behaviour expectations
- praise students exceeding expectations specific to them.

2. Use a non-verbal correction

Identify the disengaged and disruptive behaviours you experience in the classroom – for example, students calling out instead of putting their hand up, moving out of their seats to do something they shouldn't be doing, talking during independent work or using a loud voice during group work.

Rehearse, then practise non-verbal responses to the disengaged and disruptive behaviours:

using proximity, moving near the students to gain their attention to correct their behaviour

deliberately pausing, stopping what you're doing to gain the students' attention to correct their behaviour

using 'the look' to demonstrate your awareness of the behaviour and the need to correct it

using a gesture to communicate the expected behaviour.

When rehearsing with a colleague, ask them to play the role of the student.

When practising in a lesson, start with the non-verbal correction that is least intrusive to the flow of the lesson.

3. Use a verbal correction

Working through the checklist in this section will support you in planning calm responses to disengaged and disruptive behaviours, reducing the risk of not knowing what to say and potentially losing your composure.

Using [voice control](#) and [clear communication](#), rehearse, then practise responding to the disengaged and disruptive behaviours you identified previously by:

[acknowledging](#) students meeting behaviour expectations

setting up the class to engage in independent tasks or paired or group discussion so that you can have a private conversation

privately checking if a student misunderstands something and telling them what they need to do next time they don't understand

privately correcting behaviour that is not related to a misunderstanding:

- reminding the student of the expectations or instructions
- identifying the behaviour they are demonstrating, what they need to do to correct it and why
- prompting for demonstration where appropriate.

reminding the group or whole class of the expectations or instructions and checking for misunderstandings about what they need to do

using an anonymous correction to identify that there are students not meeting the expectations for behaviour

quickly correcting students' behaviour by gaining their attention and stating the desired behaviour

[pausing](#) and [acknowledging](#) the students correcting their behaviour.

When rehearsing with a colleague, ask them to play the role of the student.

4. Give a choice

Using the list of disengaged and disruptive behaviours you made earlier, identify appropriate consequences aligned with school policy, making sure they're:

related to and correcting the disengaged or disruptive behaviour – for example, moving away from those they're disrupting

not a punishment but a disincentive – for example, having to complete the learning task at another, less desirable time.

Script, rehearse then practise:

asking questions to identify the cause of the behaviour, identifying:

- if the student is moving away from something (work, peers, staff, etc.) or towards something (an object or attention from the teacher or peers, etc.)
- if there is an academic or social skill that needs supporting.

offering support to address identified causes for the behaviour

if the student doesn't identify a cause or accept support, clearly communicating a choice using non-threatening body language and a calm tone, stating:

- the expected behaviour and the impact on others and themselves of the disengaged or disruptive behaviour
- support you're able to provide
- the consequence should they choose not to correct their behaviour.

giving the student time and space to make their choice

acknowledging their positive choice, should they make that choice.

When rehearsing with a colleague, ask them to play the role of the student.

5. Implement the consequence

Ensure you've practised the 'Give a choice' step before this step.

Script, rehearse then practise:

when setting expectations early in the year, explaining to students the consequences of common disengaged and disruptive behaviours, giving examples of what each behaviour and associated consequence may look and sound like

using non-threatening body language, clear communication and voice control to respectfully and privately:

- state the disengaged or disruptive behaviour the student is demonstrating
- implement the consequence identified in the 'give a choice' step.

giving the student time and space to follow your instruction, using a combination of circulation and scanning to monitor the student, while also monitoring the rest of the class

after a short period of time, checking that the student has completed the consequence and:

- acknowledging the decision they have made to re-engage in learning and positively reaffirming the appropriate behaviour
- or
- following your school's behaviour procedure to seek additional support.

Regularly revise responding to disengaged and disruptive behaviours

Schedule points in the year to revise this practice.

Questions for reflection

When you've refined and combined each of the steps for responding to disengaged and disruptive behaviours, consider the following questions:

- To what extent are you using preventative behaviour support practices in the classroom?
Could implementation of these practices be improved to reduce the need for reactive approaches?
- Are you staying calm when responding to disengaged and disruptive behaviours? Is there anything you can do to further support your composure? Is your body language reflective of a supportive approach to disengaged and disruptive behaviours?
- To what extent is using non-verbal corrections addressing disengaged and disruptive behaviours in your classroom?
- How effectively are you selecting verbal corrections that are appropriate to the behaviour and context? What are you observing in your students' responses to these corrections? What does that tell you about the impact of these corrections?
- How effectively are you addressing disengaged or disruptive behaviour by identifying the possible cause of the behaviour and supporting students to address that cause? What impact is this having on refocusing students on learning?
- How effectively are you presenting choices to students to correct their behaviour, receive support or receive a consequence?
- What changes in disengaged and disruptive behaviours are you observing after giving support or consequences in your classroom?

For more practical guidance

AERO has developed a suite of resources to support teachers and school leaders to refine or refresh their foundational practices in creating safe and supportive learning environments through effective classroom management. You can read the [Classroom Management Resources: User Guide](#) for an overview of these resources and suggestions for their use.