Practice guide for primary and secondary schools

Develop techniques and practices

Australian Education Research Organisation

Classroom management practice

Responding to low-level disengaged and disruptive behaviour

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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 in responding to low-level disengagement and disruption to maintain a safe, supportive and inclusive learning environment for all students and support students to focus on learning.

Positive learning environments are created when teachers establish and maintain positive teacher–student relationships and proactively teach, model, revise and reinforce the expected safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours, routines and rules with their students. In a positive learning environment, these 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 may experience difficulties focusing on learning and allowing others to do so. This requires a responsive approach from the teacher to support safety, respect and focus on learning.

Any response to low-level disengagement and disruption needs to focus on reminding students of the expected safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours or teaching students the skills needed to demonstrate these behaviours. It's important to explain what students are being asked to do and why, make reasonable adjustments and provide support as required.

Goss et al. (2017)[1] define **low-level disengaged behaviour** as passive compliance 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 complete tasks.

They define **low-level disruptive behaviour** as actions that impact negatively on teaching and other students' learning, such as uninvited calling out, interrupting (or disturbing) others and not following the teacher's instructions.

To respond to low-level disengagement and disruption:

1. Monitor all students, making adjustments and providing support when needed.
2. Use a non-verbal correction.
3. Use a verbal correction.
4. Give a choice.
5. Implement the consequence.

Effectively responding to low-level disengagement and disruption requires consideration of students' diverse needs and involves several skills, including acknowledgement and praise, circulation, clear communication, deliberately pausing, non-verbal corrections, scanning and voice control.

When responding to student behaviour, always interact with students with a calm tone, respect and politeness – for example:

- asking if students misunderstand something about what they're required to do and regularly using 'Please' and 'Thank you'
- positively framing communication, stating what students are being asked to do rather than what they shouldn't do so that students understand what's required of them. For example, providing the instruction 'Start the task' instead of 'Stop messing about.' This models respectful and polite interactions for students and creates a safe, supportive and inclusive learning environment.

When disengagement and disruption occur, it's important to use responses that support students in adjusting their behaviour to be safe, respectful and learning-focused. Students will often respond to a non-verbal or verbal correction, but sometimes it will take a combination 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 help you provide effective support. While student behaviour may feel personal and be emotionally challenging for you and other students, the most effective responses are enacted in calm and respectful ways, with prepared and rehearsed responses aimed at minimising disruptions to learning. View the behaviours as signs the student or group of students need support and pause before responding to maintain and model your own emotional regulation.

It's important to consider how individual and collective perspectives, cultures and identities shape expectations, and whether there's alignment between school, home and community. Clear and accessible communication with families about classroom expectations and behaviour approaches can prompt meaningful conversations to:

- consider why behaviours might be occurring
- help understand and consider families' and the community's views
- support shared understanding
- identify required adjustments and support
- reduce confusion or anxiety for students and families.

Effectively responding to low-level disengagement and disruption

1. Monitor all students, making adjustments and providing support when needed

It's important to monitor all students. This will ensure safety, and reinforce safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviour expectations. It will also demonstrate to students that you care about them, are aware of what's happening in your classroom and will provide adjustments and support when needed.

Monitor all students by regularly using a combination of pausing, scanning and circulating. Assist students when needed, ensuring supports and adjustments are provided as required. Acknowledge and praise students' safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours and efforts.

2. Use a non-verbal correction

Effective non-verbal corrections allow you to address low-level disengagement and disruption when they first arise without interrupting the flow of the lesson. They're quick and often less intrusive than other responses. It's important to note that students may interpret non-verbal corrections differently depending on their diverse backgrounds, experiences, neurodevelopmental profiles and needs. Some students will require verbal corrections or visual supports alongside non-verbal corrections. Teaching students about specific non-verbal corrections, along with expected responses, will help develop shared understanding and may reduce the need for more intrusive responses over time.

Non-verbal corrections include:

- **proximity** – moving near the student or group of students to gain their attention to correct their behaviour, while respecting students' personal space
- **deliberately pausing** – stopping what you're doing to gain the attention of the student or group of students to correct their behaviour
- **'the look'** – turning and looking at the student or group of students combined with a gesture – for example, shaking your head, then nodding when they correct their behaviour, or pointing to your eye and then pointing and looking at where they should be looking
- **a gesture** to communicate the expected behaviours – for example, putting your finger to your lips to communicate 'silence', raising your hand when students call out to remind them of the expectation to raise their hand, or pretending to write to prompt students to continue to complete learning tasks.

Combining a deliberate pause with proximity, 'the look' or a gesture can be powerful in helping to address low-level disengagement and disruption. Students will often notice you're aware of their behaviour and respond with a positive change.

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

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 corrections should be done with minimal disruption to the flow and pace of a lesson. First, acknowledge students demonstrating safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours and deliberately pause to allow students not demonstrating these to correct their behaviour. If the behaviour continues, use a verbal correction, such as a:

- **quick reminder of expectations or instructions** using clear communication and an assertive voice. Provide students with a short reminder of the expected safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours. Allow time and space for students to action the correction and acknowledge when the safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours are demonstrated.

  For example: '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 safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours and signal that there are students not yet demonstrating these behaviours. Allow the student or group of students time and space to action the correction and acknowledge when the expected behaviours are demonstrated.

  For example: 'Thank you to those students who are listening.' *[Pause and scan.]* 'I can see a few people who are still to join us.' *[Pause and acknowledge those who have followed the direction]*. 'Thank you.'

- **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 or group of students and, using clear communication, a calm, non-threatening tone and a quiet voice, check if they understand 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 something so you can give them the support they need. Address the misunderstanding.

  If the behaviour is not related to a misunderstanding, ask if you can help them with something else. If needed, remind them of the expectations or instructions and check they understand. For example: '[Student name], it's important that you're listening and watching so that you understand what you need to do. You were trying to get [Name]'s attention when I was explaining the task. Look and listen so that you know what you need to do. Thank you.'

  Acknowledge when they correct their behaviour.

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

In some instances, you may need to provide a prompt for the student or group of students to engage in the safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours – for example, 'Have a go at [task] and let me know if you need a hand.'

After using a verbal correction, allow the student or group of students time and space to demonstrate the safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours. When disengagement or disruption continues following non-verbal and verbal correction, it's important to briefly consider why the student or group of students is behaving in this way and what might be contributing to the situation:

- Is the student or group of students trying to avoid something (e.g., learning tasks, peers, staff) or trying to gain something (e.g., a preferred item or activity, the attention of peers or staff, or sensory experiences, such as movement)?
- Is there a skill gap that needs supporting (e.g., task-related, class expectation or social skill)? Are adjustments and supports in place?
- Is there something you've brought to the situation to contribute to the disengagement or disruption? For example, did you get straight into teaching without checking in with the student or group of students after break? Did you correct their behaviour and not another student's similar behaviour?
- Briefly considering what behaviours are occurring and why they might they be occurring will help you select supports and identify consequences that better match the student or group of students' needs or the situation, avoid reinforcing the behaviour, and reduce the likelihood of escalating the situation and making the problem worse.

Give a choice

For a variety of reasons, some students may find it hard to respond positively to non-verbal and verbal corrections and continue to disengage or disrupt. A choice can function as a prompt for both the safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours the student or group of students should be engaging in and the help you can offer. It's also a signal of the implications and consequence if the prompt isn't followed.

The student or group of students should be given the choice to:

1. change what they're doing and demonstrate the expected safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours
2. receive support
3. receive a proportionate consequence.

Choices should be given, not as an ultimatum or threat, but to support re-engagement and participation.

Applying proportionate consequences

Proportionate consequences are a necessary component of teaching and reinforcing safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours. They provide clear boundaries and support in managing disengagement and disruption.

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 to common low-level disengagement and disruption should be explained to students when establishing expectations, rules and routines, 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.

Proportionate consequences may include:

- moving desks and seats away from the distraction, sensory discomfort or those being disrupted
- having the student or group of students put an item that is distracting from or disrupting their learning on your desk
- completing unfinished tasks at another time
- speaking with you at break, practising the safe, respectful, learning-focused 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 behaviours, explained to the student or group of students or applied consistently may lead to further or new disengagement, disruption, escalation or damage to the teacher–student relationship 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 a way that embarrasses or feels disrespectful to the student or group of students.

Avoiding disruption to the lesson flow and as privately as possible, clearly communicate the choice to the student or group of students in a calm, respectful tone (avoiding sarcasm or intimidating language, words or tone). With non-threatening body language move to the student's or group of students' level, side-on and outside their personal space, rather than standing over them.

1. **Try to identify the reason for the behaviours and offer support if required** – 'What is it that you need to talk with [Name] about?', 'Do you understand what this question is asking you to do?' or 'Do you have all the materials you need to get started?'

   Support the student or group of students as required if the reason is identifiable.

2. **State the safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours that are expected, the impact of the disengagement or disruption on others and themselves and offer support.**

   For example: *'[Student name], please focus on completing your learning task. Talking to the person next to you interrupts both of your learning. Can I help you with your task or is there something you would like to chat to me about?'*

3. **State the choice, including the proportionate consequence should they not be able to correct their behaviour, explaining how it will support the student or group of students and their peers**.

   For example: *'If you can complete your task quietly, you may stay here with your friends. If working quietly in this space is too difficult, you can choose to move to the empty desk so you can concentrate. As this is an important task, you'll need to finish it at another time if it's not completed now.'*

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

If the student or group of students decides to make the positive choice, acknowledge this – for example, 'Thank you for moving to a place where you're able to focus.'

4. Implement the consequence

An important part of developing trusting relationships is demonstrating consistency by following through on what you say. Proportionate consequences are only effective if consistently applied. If you say a consequence will happen if a student continues their disengagement or disruption, it's important that you implement it.

A proportionate consequence should be implemented respectfully and as privately as possible to support and maintain the students' or group of students' 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 behaviours and why they're a concern**

   '[Student name], I'm concerned because you've continued to talk rather than complete your task. This is an important task and I'm worried that it's not being done because of the distraction.'

2. **Implement the consequence**

   'Please take your things to the empty desk.'

3. **Allow the student or group of students 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 or group of students, while also monitoring the rest of the class. After a short period, check that the student or group of students has responded, or understands when they're required to complete the consequence.

4. **Acknowledge the decision they've made to re-engage in learning and positively reaffirm the safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours.**

   'Thank you for moving and focusing on your learning. *Is there anything else I can help you with now that you have a bit of space?*'

5. You might **have a short conversation** with the student or group of students at the end of the lesson to help reinforce expectations, remind them of support available, give them the opportunity to share additional insight and strengthen the relationship.

If the student or group of students persistently refuses to follow your directions at this point, follow your school's behaviour procedure to seek additional support.

When low-level disengagement or disruption persists across multiple lessons or when behaviours escalate, refer to AERO's guidance on:

- persistent disengagement and disruption
- escalated behaviour.

Rehearse and practise responding to low-level disengagement and disruption

To help you rehearse and practise, identify the low-level disengagement and disruption 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 tasks
- using a loud voice during group tasks
- not completing tasks.

Use the checklist for each step in the following section to identify your strengths and 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.

Begin by planning, scripting and rehearsing without students present, then practise with students present.

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

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

1. Monitor all students, making adjustments and providing support when needed

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, extra assistance or an adjustment
  - acknowledge and praise students' safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours and efforts.

2. Use a non-verbal correction

Rehearse, then practise non-verbal responses to low-level disengagement and disruption by:

- [ ] using proximity, moving near the student or group of students to gain their attention to correct their behaviour, while respecting students' personal space
- [ ] deliberately pausing, stopping what you're doing and looking at the student or group of students to gain their attention to correct their behaviour
- [ ] using 'the look' combined with a gesture to demonstrate your awareness of the behaviour and the need to correct it
- [ ] using a gesture to communicate the expected behaviour.

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 low-level disengagement and disruption, 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 low-level disengagement and disruption you identified previously by:

- [ ] acknowledging students demonstrating safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours then deliberately pausing to allow other students to correct their behaviour
- [ ] reminding individual students, groups or the whole class of the expectations or instructions and checking for understanding about what they need to do
- [ ] using an anonymous correction to identify that there are students not meeting the expectation for safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviour
- [ ] 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 has misunderstood something and telling them what they need to do next time they don't understand
  - asking if you can help with something else
  - reminding the student or group of students of the expectations or instructions and checking they understand
- [ ] prompting the student or group of students to engage in the safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours
- [ ] pausing and acknowledging the student or group of students changing their behaviour.

4. Give a choice

Using the identified low-level disengaged and disruptive behaviours, identify appropriate choices to offer students – including proportionate consequences aligned with school policy – making sure they:

- [ ] relate to correct the disengagement or disruption – for example, moving a student away from those they're disrupting or placing a distracting item on the teacher's desk so the student or group of students can focus
- [ ] provide clear boundaries and support in managing disengagement and disruption.

Rehearse, then practise:

- [ ] asking questions to identify the reason for the behaviours, identifying:
  - if the student or group of students is trying to avoid something (learning tasks, peers, staff, etc.) or trying to gain something (a preferred item or activity, attention from the teacher or peers, or sensory experiences, such as movement, etc.)
  - if there is an academic or social skill that needs supporting
  - whether adjustments and supports are in place
  - if you brought something to the situation that contributed to the disengagement or disruption
- [ ] offering support to address potential reasons for the behaviour
- [ ] if the student or group of students doesn't accept support, clearly communicating a choice using non-threatening body language and a calm tone, stating:
  - the expected safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours and the impact on others and themselves of the disengaged or disruptive behaviours
  - support you're able to provide
  - the proportionate consequence should they not be able to correct their behaviour, explaining how it will support the student or group of students and their peers
- [ ] giving the student or group of students time and space to make their choice
- [ ] acknowledging when they make a positive choice.

5. Implement the consequence

Ensure you've practised the Give a choice step before this step. 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 behaviours and why they're a concern
  - implement the consequence identified in the Give a choice step
- ☐ giving the student or group of students time and space to follow your instruction, using a combination of circulation and scanning to monitor them, while also monitoring the rest of the class
- ☐ after a short period of time, checking that the student or group of students has completed the consequence or understands when they're required to do so and:
  - acknowledging the decision they have made to re-engage in learning and positively reaffirming the safe, respectful, learning-focused behaviours

  or

  - following your school's behaviour procedure to seek additional support
- ☐ having a short conversation with the student or group of students at the end of the lesson to reinforce expectations, remind them of support available, give them the opportunity to share additional insights and strengthen the relationship.

Questions for reflection

When you've refined and combined each of the steps for responding to low-level disengagement and disruption, consider the following questions:

- To what extent are you using proactive approaches to prevent disengagement and disruption in the classroom?
  - How could implementation of these proactive practices be refined to reduce the need for reactive approaches?
- To what extent are your expectations appropriate for your students' age, development and diverse needs?
- When responding to disengagement and disruption, are you staying calm?
  - Are there particular student characteristics or behaviours (for example, uninvited calling out, frequently seeking attention, delaying or questioning instructions) that trigger a strong emotional response for you?
  - Is there anything you can do to further support your emotional regulation and ensure your tone, body language and overall approach remains supportive?
- How effectively are you using your knowledge of your students and any factors impacting them when responding to disengagement and disruption?
  - What are you observing in your students' responses?
  - What does that tell you about the impact of your actions?
- How effectively are you addressing disengagement or disruption by identifying possible reasons for behaviours and supporting students to address those?
  - What impact is this having on refocusing students on learning?
- How effectively are you presenting choices to students to help them focus on learning?
- What changes in disengagement and disruption are you observing after giving support or implementing proportionate consequences in your classroom?



Regularly revise responding to low-level disengagement and disruption

Schedule points in the year to revise this practice and its impact on your classroom management and students' focus on learning.

For more guidance

The following resources in AERO's classroom management suite provide practical guidance and support related to responding to disengagement and disruption.

Video

- building positive connections with all student

Observation tool

- responding to low-level disengaged and disruptive behaviours

Practice guides

- escalated behaviour
- persistent disengaged and disruptive behaviour
- non-verbal corrections
- practical refinement professional learning resource (3.84 MB, .pptx)

Reflection resource

- Responding to disengaged and disruptive behaviours

1 Goss, P., Sonnemann, J., & Griffiths, K. (2017). *Engaging students: Creating classrooms that improve learning*. Grattan Institute. https://grattan.edu.au/report/engaging-students-creating-classrooms-that-improve-learning/

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