

Order out Of chaos



Launching into an active lesson with children who struggle to behave might sound ill advised, but its in these very situations that pupils who find it difficult to sit and listen can thrive, says Paul Dix...

Successful active lessons with children who exhibit extreme behaviours are a triumph of hope over experience. It takes a lot of time and patience to get to the point where the initial pandemonium gives way to productive learning. Cementing children to their chairs will seem tempting for a while yet! It is hard enough to manage those who exhibit challenging behaviour in sedentary lessons. What do you do if you want to tackle more adventurous active lessons with children who struggle to sit and listen?

Not everyone wants to join in, not everyone listens to the whistle, not everyone can resist hiding in the hedges or breaking for the border. That is no reason not to take the risk. Children need to be taught how to learn actively, even the ones who don't respond well. If we don't teach them the skills now, they move into secondary education ill equipped. I can still hear the voice of an old science teacher echoing down a school corridor, 'There will be no practical work until you can all behave'. The practical work is precisely what interested, excited and motivated the children. It was held out as a prize for those who could feign the same interest in mundane wordsearches and 'copy the diagram' ridiculousness.

As you prepare for active lessons with children who are likely to lose control, consider who you will give responsibility to, which tasks can be given to trickier characters, and who needs a quiet word to prepare for the change of environment and pace.

tip

STRING THEORY

In large, open teaching areas, defining spaces for groups to work in is vital. As you allocate groups their working area, give each group a length of string. The string is used to define the working area. Spotting students who leave their own group becomes easier and arguments about who owns which space are eliminated.

Don't skip the warm up

Warm up activities give opportunities for everyone to succeed. They give you an opportunity to reinforce the idea that this group is disciplined, controlled and safe (even when your experience may tell you otherwise). You are preparing them to succeed rather than preaching the rules and priming them to fail. If you get this part wrong then those who are wobbling will wobble into independent tasks and destabilise groups.

Sit in a circle with the group and light a candle to place in the middle (or use a bunch of keys/hat/scarf) for everyone to focus on. Explain to the children that the game is simply to count to 20 by throwing in numbers when there is a silence. If two people say the same number at the same time then the group must start again. Encourage everyone to be comfortable with the silence and not to try and rush to be first. The teacher might say '1' for the first few rounds until the group is used to the game.

Children very quickly start to work



minutes and he is climbing the tree. The conversation has suddenly become a lot trickier. Think quick, instant sanctions that give pause for thought but don't break the excitement. Give some children the idea that active tasks are optional and they will opt out all together; perhaps using the opportunity to get maximum attention. As this cycle repeats itself it is easy to give up on the idea that children with more extreme behaviour can be included in active lessons. As the curriculum shrinks for some children, expectations are lowered and choices narrowed. I met a child last month who had been banned from every active lesson because he could not stick to the behaviours that were required. The teachers were waiting for the child to change behaviours. I think they are still waiting.

Set time limits

In active group work, teach pupils manageable routines. Help them to manage their group time by providing clear limits. 'You have 10 minutes to prepare and one minute to show everyone what you have done'. As the children are working, give gentle reminders of how much time they have used and where they should be on the agreed routine, 'Three minutes have gone - you need to be on your feet and working'. I often find it useful to provide a model of how ten minutes of group work might be used by leading a group through an open demonstration. With strict time limits children will become skilled at managing their time and no one will need to sit through 15 minutes of rambling performance by the group who are convinced quantity beats quality. Children who struggle to contain their behaviour will work better with short bursts of activity rather

cooperatively and enjoy the challenge of reaching 20. If you don't over use the game and only allow them say, 10 goes at a time, it can be revisited at the beginning and end of the lesson. Reflect back to the children how controlled and well disciplined they are. Over egg it slightly. Prove to them that they have the skills to work actively in open spaces.

The game can be developed so that instead of counting, each student has to jump into the middle of the circle and be the only one jumping, or you can try putting hands on heads or spelling long words.

Make a checklist

Now agree a checklist of five success criteria for children to work to during the lesson. Number the working groups and, as you notice different groups succeeding, record their group number against the checklist. Children will start looking at the checklist, focusing on the skills for the task and try to get each one ticked off for their group. You

will be able to identify and encourage groups who are having difficulty and better gauge if the time you have given them for the activity is appropriate. If the groups are performing their work, the checklist can be used by the audience to give accurate feedback using appropriate terminology.

Define and rehearse clear, audible stop cues that are instantly recognisable. This routine must be taught relentlessly. Give children who stop immediately extra responsibility. Give those who don't a warning, then a sin bin. In the classroom you might pull up a chair or drop down to discuss behaviour. On the sports field this would look odd. Side by side when standing is best. The threat is reduced, other children have no idea that there is a problem and the conversation is less intimidating. The sin bin should be quick, frequently used if necessary but seconds rather than minutes. Too long sitting on the bench/under the tree/on the white line and other behaviours begin. Leave Clive for five





Behaviour support

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Catch the bug

TRY THIS QUICK, CREEPY CRAWLY WARM UP ACTIVITY...

We know the value of a proper physical warm up before an active drama lesson, but as teachers we are also very aware of how time consuming it can be.

Instead of leading a whole group warm up, teach students simple exercises they can routinely engage in as they arrive at the lesson; The Bug works very well.

With children standing shoulder width apart, knees bent (throughout) talk them through exercise the first time.

'There is a bug on the ceiling above your heads, look at it with your eyes and allow the rest of your body to follow the movement as it falls onto your chest, and slowly crawls down over your tummy, over your belt line and down your thighs, over your knees, shins, over your shoes and then out across the floor to where the floor meets the walls, keep following it as it crawls up the wall and the ceiling until it is again above your head.'

- Make sure children keep their shoulders and arms relaxed throughout. When connected the movement creates a wave through the body that can be slowed down, sped up or reversed (the bug starts on the chest and leaps up to the ceiling).
- As children arrive at the lesson you can now ask for three slow 'bugs', two fast and two reverse and they can begin to take responsibility for warming up, ready to begin.
- Reinforce their control, calm demeanor and ability to concentrate on their own movement and not others.

than 20 minutes of loosely structured group work. The limits will provoke creativity and the common goal will be in sharp focus.

Keep your cool

Constantly reframe behaviour with some, 'Lovely energy today Kylie. I would love to see that energy directed at the bottom of the wall bars'; reach spiritual levels of patience, "I am sure your Mum didn't say that about me..."; and refuse to give up on others, "I can lend you some clothes to replace the kit damaged in the friendly fire incident'. Stick to the plan, get to the end. Don't let the behaviour provoke you into an emotional response.

The catch 22 is clear. Many of the children that demonstrate more extreme behaviour have a learning difficulty. They thrive in the more active, practical, lessons. Yet their behaviour at the table is so poor that you feel they could never be trusted in active maths games in the hall. The truth is that active learning is precisely what such children need. To deprive them of it because of behaviour demonstrated in more sedentary tasks works is perverse. It leads to children disengaging from school as the stuff that they really enjoy is withheld from them.