

The art of looking busy



Paul Dix looks across the gender divide to tackle the inconspicuous issue of misbehaving girls...

Sitting and pretending to listen comes easily to Chantelle. Like a stealth bomber she delivers her payload undetected – but the fallout will be felt for some time to come...

Whereas keeping under the teacher's radar is not a skill that some boys ever develop, in girls it can seem innate. A mastery of the art of looking busy allows some to cruise along, avoiding work and fuelling disputes without being caught. Boys' behaviour can be more worrying than girls' – it's more obvious, louder, more sudden – but it's no more destructive. And, disguised by new alliances and jealousies, the sustained nature of girls' behaviour is not easily readable or solvable.

The consequences meted out to boys can emerge through emotional decisions. Our emotional filter reaches straight for the highest sanction in response to aggressive behaviour – "I can't believe what you just threw across the



room! No break for a week! Go straight to the headteacher's office! I've called in the Special Forces!" etc. – but the emotion can make the response disproportionate. For girls, whose behaviours are more subtle, the response is less dramatic. Of course, the note-passing seems less serious than the projectile paint pot at first, but the long-term consequences of subtle intimidation mean that the sanctions should be on a par.

Stay on task

How relevant are your rules for the behaviour of the girls you teach? Many classroom rules focus on boys' behaviour – "Keep your hands and feet to yourselves", "Keep

football for the playground" etc. The behaviours are easy to identify and it's obvious when the rules are broken. But do these rules help to teach the girls relevant behaviours, or do they seem irrelevant to them? What might they look like if they were aimed at the girls? "Keep your disagreements private"? "Whispering is not good manners", perhaps? Have a look at the rules that have been agreed for your classroom – are they really tackling the behaviour of both groups?

For girls who employ covert tactics, the routines of behaviour need to be tighter, the consequences as sharpened as they are for the boys. Identify the specific behaviours that you want to see and teach them. 'Stay on task' is a strong, universal rule that when properly applied brings

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the girls' behaviour well onto your radar. Now you can address the lengthy stationary organising, the note-passing, drifting, dreaming and extended colouring.

Using 'stay on task' also allows you to pin inappropriate behaviour on the learning and not on the current dispute between the children. This makes conversations with parents easier. You know that "Matilda still needs to follow our rule about staying on task" is going to go down better than "Matilda is stirring again".

Intervening early with girls' behaviour means that routines of poor behaviour have less chance of developing, and that groups and cliques are deterred from getting involved in individual disputes. This can mean the difference between disputes that are taken home and those dealt with in the classroom.

With the girls, your knowledge and understanding of the children's friendships and alliances is important. Although these relationships and friendship groups can alter on a daily (and at times hourly!) basis, your knowledge of the wider family relationships is important.

While boys' behaviour is often a reaction to the emotion of the moment, girls' behaviour is

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often better planned. The boys run in after breaktime shouting and arguing about the latest footballing crisis; the girls walk in with a worrying silence.

At breaktime, huddles of girls plot vengeance. Like an amateur A-Team, roles are assigned, materials prepared and plans drawn up. Your proactive disruption of these plans can be the difference between lunchtime with your salad box and a lunchtime wiping Kylie's tears away. Disrupt their plan by changing group arrangements and taking a firm grasp on the classroom configuration. Make your alterations sudden, unpredictable and immediate. If you sense trouble brewing, making quick changes will buy you time – time to redraw the expectations, lower the level of tolerance and lower the radar; time to break it down to the behaviours that you want to see. If you want to teach the behaviours that are needed to succeed, you must address them directly.

disciplined. They will stay under the radar for positive reinforcement and praise. They go unacknowledged because their appropriate behaviour is effortless, expected and inevitably taken for granted. The urgencies of challenging behaviour take over, and it can be the end of term or year before their efforts are formally recognised. The trouble is that if you don't recognise these pupils for behaving well they may seek attention in different ways. Make a point of privately reinforcing the behaviour of those girls who manage to stay focused amidst the flurry of Chantelle's swearing and the occasional flash of Daniel's fists. They deserve your stickers, positive notes and 'good news' chats with mum. They deserve your appreciation, enthusiasm and kindness. Forget them and you can find yourself rewarding children who decide to work for five minutes above those who behave perfectly every day.

More boys are excluded from education, and more boys are labelled as difficult, naughty or trouble, but girls can be just as disruptive to their learning and the learning of others. Our perception is skewed. Perhaps the problem is not that boys' behaviour is worse than the girls' – maybe it's just that boys get caught...

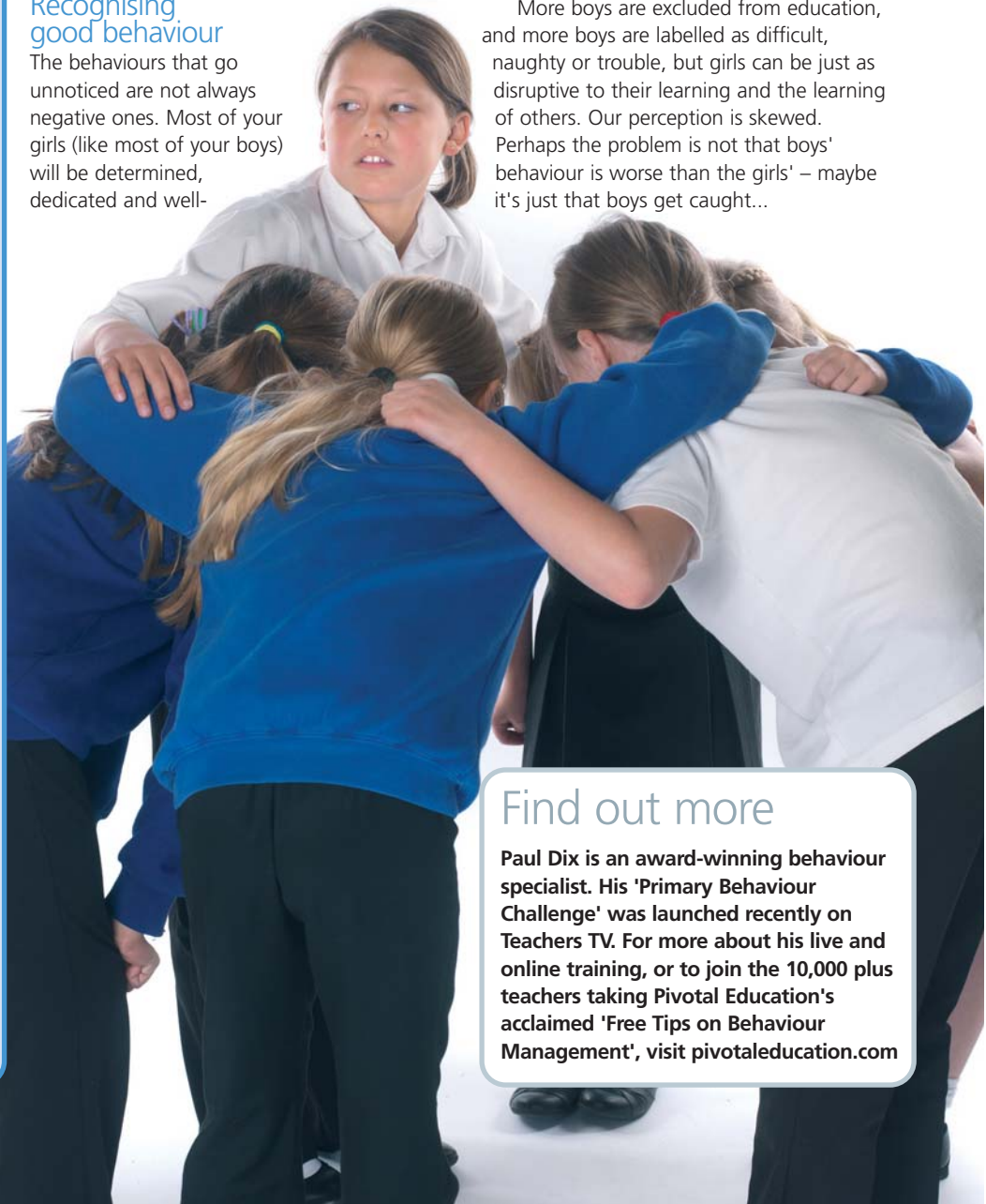
Guiding the girls

QUICK STEPS TO SUCCESSFULLY MANAGING SUBTLE MISBEHAVIOUR IN YOUR CLASSROOM...

- **Take control of the seating plan and groupings and be prepared to change them quickly when you sense trouble brewing.**
- **Lower your radar and ensure all of the children know what behaviours constitute 'staying on task'.**
- **Pin the more subtle and damaging aspects of girls' behaviour on the learning, not their personality or emotions.**
- **Review your rules. Do they address the behaviour change that you want in the girls as well as the boys?**
- **Recognise and reinforce the behaviour of the quietest children, those who habitually behave well and who rarely receive negative attention.**
- **Teach the precise behaviours that are needed to succeed. Don't tolerate or ignore off-task behaviour.**
- **Use positive notes cut into five parts as a short-term reward that can build to a full note over the next few days.**
- **Use positive phone calls for all children, particularly for those who behave well every day.**
- **Put your efforts into early intervention. Unpacking the dispute afterwards can take a long time.**
- **Re-establish expectations with particular groups before each session. Describe the behaviours that you want to see and catch them demonstrating them.**

Recognising good behaviour

The behaviours that go unnoticed are not always negative ones. Most of your girls (like most of your boys) will be determined, dedicated and well-



Find out more

Paul Dix is an award-winning behaviour specialist. His 'Primary Behaviour Challenge' was launched recently on Teachers TV. For more about his live and online training, or to join the 10,000 plus teachers taking Pivotal Education's acclaimed 'Free Tips on Behaviour Management', visit pivotaleducation.com