Think before you speak

Give careful consideration to your choice of words when addressing disruptive behaviour, says **Dr Bill Rogers**. It can make the difference between begrudging cooperation and stubborn refusal...

The language of discipline needs to be based on the core rights and responsibilities of students and teachers, and these should be discussed during our critical first meeting with a new class. It is essential that our students understand what we mean when we talk about:

- **the right to feel safe** (this should address emotional and psychological safety, as well as physical safety)
- **the right to learn** (without undue distraction and disruption). This implies our ability to lead, guide and encourage our students in their responsibilities
- **the right to respect and fair treatment** (this includes the way we, as teachers, model courtesy, respect and fair treatment)

What we actually say in discipline contexts has a direct bearing on children's awareness of their behaviour and the likelihood that they will co-operate with us (Rogers, 2011). The following examples, drawn from my work as a mentor teacher, illustrate how we can use discipline language in a way that seeks to:

- enable a student's behaviour awareness
- engage his behaviour ownership and co-operation

It is my contention that we should give as much thought to a 'discipline plan' as we do to a lesson plan. A key feature of any such plan is how we use discipline language, and why

As you reflect on the following language examples it is also crucial to be aware of the effect of tone of voice and the way we convey intent by our body language and manner.

1. Giving directions

When we give a direction to a student it is important to focus our language on the *expected behaviour*. For example, consider a scenario in which several students are calling out in whole-class teaching time and the teacher says, "Don't call out please!" This only tells the class/individual what we don't want them to do. Some teachers will also use the pointless interrogative, such as "Why are you calling out?" Or, equally unhelpful, "Are you calling out, Travis?!"

Contrast the above with the following: Several students are calling out in whole-class teaching time (it is a Y6 class). The teacher briefly, *tactically pauses* as she scans the faces of her class. "A number of students are calling out." Sometimes the *directional cue* is enough to raise behaviour awareness. We may need to add the *directional cue* or *rule reminder*, e.g. "Hands up, thanks." or "Remember our class rule for discussion, thanks." We find that 'thanks', said confidently and respectfully, is more effective than 'please'. After all, it's not a request.

Some teachers seek to settle a restless class by saying things like, "Can you PLEASE be quiet?", "Can you please stop calling out and chatting?" or "Will you face the front and listen?!" When we give a whole-class direction it should focus on the behaviour we want to see. For example, while scanning for eye contact the teacher might say, "Settling

down... looking this way and listening... thanks." The use of verbs, or participles, is intentional.

TRY THIS...
Two students are fiddling with the window blinds during whole-class teaching time. The teacher stops talking to the class. She *briefly* and tactically pauses to allow cognitive take-up. "Jayson... Adam... you're fiddling with the window blinds" (a brief descriptive cue to raise awareness). "Leave the blinds, thanks, and facing this way" (the directional cue). Contrast this with "Why are you fiddling with the blinds?" or "Don't fiddle with the blinds."

2. Directed choices

A student is playing with a toy instead of doing his work. His teacher comes alongside, greets him, and focuses his attention back on his work. She reminds him about what he needs to be doing with his classwork. At other times she will ask the student, "What are you supposed to be doing now?" and offers help. She doesn't ask him *why* he has a mini skateboard hiding under his pencil case. As she leaves him, she quietly adds a *directed* choice. "Brett... I want you to put your toy on my desk or you can put it in your pencil case." Her tone and manner are decisive, calm and respectful. Her approach may be described as *least-intrusive* (Rogers, 2011). She doesn't walk over and simply demand students to hand over toys, i-Pods, phones, loud key rings, etc. She greets, refocuses to the work and uses directed choices.

He whinges that he wasn't playing with it. She tactically ignores his frown and sulky whingeing tone and keeps the focus – briefly – on the primary issue at this point. She repeats the directed choice and walks away to give him 'take-up time'. She notices, a little later, that he has sulkily put the toy away and resumed his classwork. She goes over to quietly encourage him in his progress.

TRY THIS...
Another form of 'choice' can be expressed by the 'when... then' cue. "*Yes* you can play with the farm animals *when* you've finished your work and packed away." This choice can be presented to an infant student who is whingeing about finishing a classroom activity. Contrast 'when... then' with "No you can't... because."

3. Using questions

Do we actually want to know 'why' a student is being attentional, distracting or disruptive? Even if they could tell us, would it help? After all, infants often don't know 'why'. When we use an interrogative form of question like this ("Why?" or "Are you…?") it can breed incipient annoyance, potential conflict or it can easily invite the student to fabricate 'the truth', particularly with older students.

If we spot a student who is task-avoiding, it's far better to greet him as we draw alongside his desk and then refocus his efforts. A *brief descriptive* cue can raise his

awareness. "Travis, (always use the student's first name) I notice you're not working. How can I help?" It can also help to use a quiet, calm, direct question such as, "What are you supposed to be doing now?" rather than the unhelpful, "Why aren't you working?"

If a student hasn't got a pen in the first few lessons, I provide him with what he needs. If after several lessons it's clear this is more than forgetfulness, we will need to work with the student on a one-to-one plan to enable his responsibility (see Rogers, 2011). In the classroom itself we never argue about *why* a student hasn't got the necessary equipment.

TRY THIS...
I have seen teachers - including myself in younger days – ask quite silly questions, for instance:

- "Do you want to give me that noisy key-ring…?"
- "Do you want to come and take the lesson?" (This to a group of chatty girls in the instructional phase of the lesson.)
- "Are you talking …?" (to students clearly talking, while the teacher is conducting whole-class teaching).

If we are going to use questions as part of our overall discipline, we're better off using questions that are liable to enable students' behaviour awareness (Rogers, 2011) i.e. make them think a bit; even transitionally.

4. Using direct questions

On playground duty I noticed five lads playing football in the infant area of the playground. Their large, physical, spatial presence was making it difficult for the infants to play there. I walked over and introduced myself as visiting teacher. I asked them how things were going - a polite, social opener. I got a mixed, partly sulky, "OK". I'm sure they knew, I knew they knew that they'd been 'rumbled'. Basically I was just being 'relaxedly vigilant'.

"I notice you're playing football in the infant area." This descriptive cue raises the students' behaviour awareness.

I paused; the leader of the group immediately said, "Other teachers don't care if we play here anyway – long as there's no little kids and that."

"Maybe other teachers don't mind, I can check…" (A bit of 'partial agreement' goes a long way). I quickly addressed the group to the important question, "What's the school rule about football?" The rule, I knew, was they should be playing football in another area – not in the infant area. I wanted them to 'own' this admission of the rule hence the direct imperative question "What's the rule for …?"

They whinged again, "I told you other teachers..." "You did," I partially agreed. "What's the school rule about football?" I wanted to keep the focus on the primary behaviour / issue, i.e. the fair, school-wide rule.

One of the lads sighed, breaking ranks, and said "We're supposed to play down by the dustbins area… (sigh)"

"Sounds like you know the fair rule fellas. Enjoy the rest of playtime." They walked off muttering, eyes raised and frowning. We tactically ignored this natural frustration.

TRY THIS...
When asking questions in discipline (and management) contexts it helps to use direct interrogative forms "What…?", "When…?", "How…?", "Where…?" rather than "Why…?" or "Are you…?"
This enables the student to focus on what they need to think about or do relative to the context of the question. The two most common questions asked in this regard - both in and out of class - are "What are you doing…?" or "What is our rule for…?", followed by "What should you be doing?' If a student whinges or argues we find it helpful to refocus to the main issue at that point, sometimes adding 'partial-agreement', as in the playground incident.

5. Clarifying consequences

Where students continue to distract others the teacher will *briefly* clarify the consequence. Take the example of a student who continues fiddling with his phone after being given a *directed* choice, "On my table or in your bag." The teacher will go back and clarify the consequence for that student, "If you continue to have the phone on your desk, I'll have to follow this up with you after class time." This is said not as a threat but as a clear awareness of the student's

responsibility. Most students will grudgingly, often with muttered sighs and raised eyes, put the object away. At this point, it will help to *tactically* ignore such 'secondary behaviours' (Rogers, 2011).

If the student refuses to co-operate with the fair direction, reminder, or directed choice and his behaviour is clearly affecting the learning and safety of others, we will need to be more intrusive and apply clear, firm and calm time-out measures.

The use of time-out is a necessary option where repeated distracting or disruptive behaviour is affecting the learning or safety of other students. It enables the student to calm down and refocus. A clear, staged policy and practice is required and there should be several ways in which a student can be directed to a time-out area in the classroom. Teachers should be able to call on a nearby colleague to assist a pupil, or a senior teacher if necessary.

It is crucial for colleagues to reflect on and discuss how to calmly and firmly cue very challenging students (see Rogers, 2011 Op. Cit). It is also crucial that time-out be used calmly as well as decisively when needed. Time-out should not be a de-facto reward or used as intentional punishment.

We always distinguish between our characteristic use of language in discipline and bad day syndrome. We all have bad days, as do our students. We're obviously fallible. What our students remember is our characteristic language as a key feature of our relationship with them.

Do we consciously seek to avoid unnecessary confrontation, embarrassment or sarcasm? Do we consciously seek to cue positive corrective language, "Do ..." rather than "Don't ..."; "When... then" rather than "No you can't... because ..." Do we seek to be *least intrusive* where possible? If we need to be more intrusive, are we able to speak assertively and decisively while communicating a sense of calmness? Necessary assertion and communicating calmness are not antithetical.

A conscious reflection on our characteristic language of discipline will enable the aims noted earlier. It is my contention that we should give as much thought to a 'discipline plan' as we do to a lesson plan. A key feature of any such plan is how we use discipline language, and why.

Above all, such a plan is means to an end of building a positive working relationship with students, so that they feel safe and able to make the best use of their time while they are with us.

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CRACKING CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR...

Dr Bill Rogers has worked in many challenging schools in Australia and the UK as a mentor teacher, teaching alongside colleagues and encouraging shared peer reflection on teacher leadership.

He has written a number of books on behaviour management, discipline, colleague support, and teacher stress.

The particular reference cited in this article (Rogers, 2011) is the major third edition of his book, *Classroom Behaviour: A Practical Guide to Effective Teaching, Behaviour Management and Colleague Support* (Sage Publications, London). This book has been translated into several European languages.

Dr Bill Rogers is a regular visitor to the UK conducting in-service programmes in schools and universities. He is also Fellow of the Australian College of Education; an Honorary Life Fellow at Trinity College (Leeds) and an Honorary Fellow at the Melbourne University Graduate School of Education.