

What do you call someone who is disruptive in class?

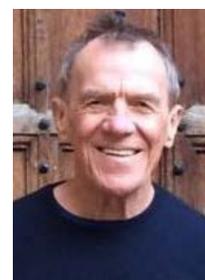
Tom Nicholson begins with a painfully recognisable set of observations of a teacher's efforts to deal with a five-year-old child – actual teacher comments that he had collected over several months in a Year 1 class. This article summarises some relevant research on behaviour problems and learning difficulties, and provides some ideas for helping students like James and his teacher.

*Eyes this way, James.
Yes, James, I like the way you put your hands up.
Good listening James.
James is sitting very nicely.
James, move away from Kevin please.
James, sit up please.
James, this is the tenth time I've talked to you. Sit up, you need to be listening.
James, you are meant to be listening.
James, do I need to see your Mum? You need to sort out your behaviour.
James, I will write your name on the board if you continue to be silly on the mat – or else you will go to another class.
That's your last chance, James.
James!*

The above observations of the interaction between James and his teacher are very familiar. Interestingly, although James' teacher focused on behaviour issues, she knew there were other issues driving his behaviour – namely difficulties with reading. When James was asked about his reading and writing, his own comment was "I'm dumb." As a Year 1 student, and so young, James' behaviour would typically be described as merely a 'nuisance' (Merrett & Wheldall, 1984). Nevertheless, even at this early age, the prognosis did not seem to be good, and there was a chance that the future for James might include a label of ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), or, EBD (emotional and behaviour difficulties). Was there anything to stop this from happening? It was clear that he could hardly read or write anything even after a year in school. It raised the question, are his behaviour issues causing his reading problem or is the reading problem causing the behaviour issues? If we addressed the literacy issues early and quickly, could we prevent behaviour issues? The research shows that although we can assess emotional and behavioural difficulties and give them a label (EBD) this might mask the real problem, which is that the student is struggling with basic literacy skills.

The label EBD may be applied to students who are disruptive in class, or who are withdrawn or lacking in concentration, or show other behavioural disturbances (Pirrie & Macleod, 2009). The prevalence of the use of the label varies from one percent to six percent, depending on how the 'disorder' is defined (Kaufmann, 2001). Several studies indicate that teachers regard behaviour difficulties as a major issue (Osher, Osher & Smith, 1994; Elam

& Rose, 1995; McDaniel, 1986). Behavioural disturbances not infrequently result in exclusion from school (Imich, 1994); in England as many as 4.5 percent of



pupils are excluded from school, mainly for persistent disruptive behaviour or physical assaults (Department for Education, 2010) and in New Zealand the exclusion rate is nearly three percent (Education Counts, 2020)

The long-term outcome for students who are classified as EBD is not good (Levy & Chard, 2001). Landrum, Katsyannis and Archwamety (2004) indicate that in the United States the chances are very high that students who are labelled EBD will drop out of school and be unable to find even part time work, and at least 50 per cent are likely to find themselves in police custody at some stage.

... are his behaviour issues causing the reading problem or is the reading problem causing the behaviour issues?

It is difficult for teachers in the classroom to cope with students who are running wild. Teaching reading or other basic skills to students who have serious EBD is probably the last thing on the teacher's mind – it is clearly frequently more urgent to get them settled or even taken out of the classroom. Mavropoulou and Padelidu (2002) report that teachers tend to consider a problem

like EBD is related to home issues, rather than school issues, and that if EBD students are provided with special education help at school, the support tends to focus on improving social skills.

But there is an argument for trying to see things from a different perspective. The point is that academic problems are common with some (not all) students with EBD (Coleman & Vaughn, 2000; De Lugt, 2007), and academic assistance is often sorely needed as well as help with social skills. A meta-analysis comparing the achievement of EBD and non-EBD students (based on 25 studies and nearly 2,500 students) found an effect size of $-.64$, indicating a very large deficit in the academic skills of the EBD groups (Reid et al., 2004). A study tracking the progress of EBD students compared with learning disabled (LD) students over a five year period in the United States found that EBD students made hardly any progress in reading compared with LD students, even though they received more special education services (Anderson, Kutash & Duchnowski, 2001).

There is evidence, moreover, that making progress in literacy may be important in reducing the incidence of behaviour problems (Reschley, 2010; Pierce et al., 2004). A one-year intervention study by Ialongo, Poduska, Wethamer and Kellam (2001) offered behavioural support in the form of a 'Good Behaviour Game' (see Figure 1) where explicit behavioural rules were to be followed in order to win prizes (see Donaldson et al., 2011), and this behavioural support was combined with an enhanced literacy and mathematics curriculum. A second experimental group in this study received a broader intervention involving family-school partnerships. Both treatments showed positive effects, but the combination of behavioural and academic support was more effective than the family-school partnership treatment in improving reading and maths, and also resulted in lower levels of conduct problems. In a follow-up study, the treatment that involved a combination of behavioural and academic support showed stronger long-term effects in terms of students graduating from high school and attending college (Bradshaw et al., 2009).

Even adolescents who have been permanently excluded from schools have been shown to respond well to support programs that give them successful *learning* experiences, such

as attaining the skills required to gain a power boat driving certificate (Kinder, Howsey, Moore & White, 2000).

Further evidence of the relationship between behaviour disorders and academic difficulties comes from several studies showing that simply adjusting the difficulty level of reading tasks produces lower rates of disruptive behaviour (e.g. Jorgeson, 1977; Haydon, 2012).

Even adolescents who have been permanently excluded from schools ... respond well to support programs that give them successful learning experiences

Even though teachers may feel that behaviour disturbances come from the home background rather than the school, this may not be the whole story. Poor behaviour may be a way of escaping a learning task that the student knows is too difficult. If as teachers we focus just on the negative behaviour, we are at risk of producing a student who is compliant, but who still fails academically. If we focus on both behaviour and academics, however, we have a chance of producing a well-behaved successful student. It is essential for schools to focus on ensuring that students with behaviour problems make good academic progress.

... simply adjusting the difficulty level of tasks produces lower rates of disruptive behaviour

For a student like James, if he could be helped at an early stage to feel competent rather than "dumb" for example, by teaching him explicit skills of phonemic awareness, the alphabet, and how to read and make words using phonics (e.g., Castle, Riach & Nicholson, 1994) he could well have many more chances open to him as he grows up.

Note:

This article is based on a chapter Tom Nicholson wrote for the Garner et al. (2014) *SAGE Handbook of emotional and behavioral difficulties* (2nd ed., pp. 177-188). SAGE.

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Our Class Rules

-  1. We will sit nicely on the mat
-  2. We will not talk when the teacher is talking
-  3. We will not run in the classroom
-  4. We will look after each other
-  5. We will look after our stuff

Good Behaviour Game	Points
Team 1 Finee James Sisy Ali	
Team 2 Kevin Ruby Stephanie Mila	
Team 3 Tristan Amy Toni Harper	
Team 4 Tanya Josh Willow Jack Lucy	
Team 5 Tyler Ben Jessica Emily	

Figure 1: Good Behaviour Game.

The teacher and class make up the rules of the game. They divide the class into teams. They set a cut-off score that will win the game, e.g., a score of less than 4. The teacher writes on the class whiteboard a penalty of one mark for anyone who breaks the rules. At the end of the day the team with the best score below the cut-off wins the reward, e.g., stickers, stars, early mark for playtime, pieces of fruit, and so on.