

When Students Say “No!”: Strategies for Managing Resistance

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Sally: Ms. Sorensen, can I go to the library during free time?

Ms. Sorensen: Not now, Sally.

Sally (whining): But whyyyyy?

Ms. Sorensen: That wouldn't be fair to other students because you went to the library the last two days in a row.

Sally (forcefully): That's a stupid reason! Kathy, Ryan, and Monica have all gone there more than one day in a row. Do you like them better than me? Why can't I go?

Ms. Sorensen (exasperated): Because I said so!

Sally (glaring): No! I'm not staying in the classroom, and you can't make me!

Mr. Sorensen (angrily): Do not talk to me in that manner. Now you're going to the principal's office.

What's Behind the Resistance?

What administrator can't relate to the extremely frustrating situation described above? As an administrator, the problem is now in your lap. You now have to deal with a resistant student and an angry teacher who may not like the way you subsequently handle the situation. As educators—both administrators and teachers—we expect students to do what we ask, in a respectful manner. Why do students challenge our authority? There is no mystery as to why students say “No” to adults' directions.

This non-compliant behavior allows them to:

- gain attention
- avoid a task they don't want to do
- or gain power by trying to irritate us

All too often, educators focus solely on the **form**, or outward appearance, of a student's behavior and don't stop to think about **what purpose it's serving** for the student. For example, a student may enter the classroom angry after being falsely accused of tattling by peers during recess. The student may have felt helpless in trying to convince peers of her innocence. So, upon walking into the classroom she may purposely knock a book off a shelf. When her teacher politely asks her to pick up the book she replies, “No, I won't pick up the book! You can't make me pick up the book! No one can make me pick up the book!”

The form of the behavior--knocking a book off the shelf—is the least important aspect for the teacher to address. The student could have just as easily thrown her backpack across the room, refused to do a math worksheet, or yelled at another student. So, what **purpose** does her behavior serve? Knocking the book to the floor is a way for the girl to feel empowered after feeling so helpless at recess.

Laying the Groundwork for New Strategies

Here are some important preconditions for increasing student compliance:

- First, be aware that **some habitual ways of dealing with students**, especially punishing them, **may actually be making the negative interactions worse—and harder to change**. When a student responds to a teacher’s direction by whining, throwing a temper tantrum, or just saying “No,” it’s common for teachers to punish the student (i.e., administer negative consequences). But students who are highly uncooperative have most likely been punished repeatedly. Students who are continuously sent to the principal’s office indicates that this technique is ineffective for both the teacher and the principal. The reason is that if this form of punishment worked, educators would be using it less often rather than more often with a student because the result of the punishment would be to reduce or stop the student’s unfavorable behaviors. Furthermore, when teachers and administrators try to administer punishment, it is easy get into a power struggle with the student. Once you find yourself in a power struggle, the student has already “won” by having gotten just what she wanted—to feel in control of the situation by irritating you.
- Second, research tells us that the way you make a request of a student (or adult) can affect how she responds. It’s easier to avoid power struggles and get compliance from others if you **give them directions in a clear, direct, and specific fashion**, using as few words as possible, and give them a reasonable amount of time to comply. By contrast, you may encourage power struggles with others if your commands are vague, overly wordy, and include multiple instructions for the desired behavior.
- Third, before you can try these new strategies to gain compliance, you must be able to **create rapport with students**. Rapport involves communicating with a student, using her point of view. Here’s an example: A student is sent to your office for talking excessively in class. She tells you “all the girls in my class talk. I want to be in style too, so I’m going to talk as much as possible.” You respond, “I think it’s important for girls to be in style, and I want you to be in style, too.” This response creates rapport because it validates what the student is seeking. After all, what can

she say in response? “No, you’re wrong; I really don’t want to be in style?” Once rapport is created, it becomes easier to obtain compliance.

New Strategies to Encourage Compliance

There are four rather unusual, but more positive, strategies for increasing compliance in, and avoiding power struggles with, others. Although these approaches require you to re-think some ways of managing students’ behavior, managing resistance doesn’t have to be a complicated, time-consuming, and frustrating endeavor. Students always give us clues on how to deal with them successfully. But you must be looking for these clues and know how to turn them into strategies for managing their behavior. Unfortunately, the older we get, the more stuck we can become in habitual ways of looking at and responding to students’ misbehavior. Consequently, we fail to pick up on these important clues that are a key to compliance.

The key to changing a student’s resistant behavior is **changing the context—either the setting or circumstances—that surrounds her behavior**. If you think about it, any behavior gets its meaning from the context in which it happens: A lifeguard’s skills have more meaning in the context of a public swimming pool than they do on a ski slope; reading has more meaning in the context of a library than it does in a game of soccer. All behavior is defined by its context. Therefore, if you can change the context surrounding a student’s behavior, you can also change the meaning, purpose, and her motivation to engage in the behavior. I’ll describe four strategies based on this idea.

Three Important Considerations for Using these Techniques

- Be aware that these methods involve telling a student to continue performing the unwanted behavior in some way. However, the short-term hassle will have a long-term payoff of more cooperative students.
- Because you will permit a student to perform unwanted behavior, these approaches **cannot be used** for behaviors that are dangerous to others (i.e., aggression) or to the student (i.e., self-injury).
- Most importantly, you must be able to present these approaches to a student with an attitude that you are pleased she can become even better at the behavior. When you don’t respond negatively, there’s no payoff for the student in continuing the behavior.

Direct a Student to Engage in More of the Behavior

The idea behind this approach is that everyone has a tolerance level for how much of a behavior they want to perform. When we make a student's tolerance level intolerable, she will change the behavior on her own. Recall the example of the principal confronted with the student who wanted to be "in style" by talking excessively in class. The principal created rapport with her, then scheduled time for her to perform the undesirable behavior. "It sounds like you have a lot of catching up to do compared to the other girls in your class," he told her. "Every day before school starts, why don't you grab the timer from my office, set it for 15 minutes, and practice talking to others just like during class." The principal was not angry, nor did he deliver the standard lecture about the drawbacks of talking in class. Instead, he expressed pleasure that the student had a chance to "catch up" and "be in style" with her classmates.

The student is likely to follow the principal's direction because (1) it was what she wanted to do and (2) the direction was not presented as punishment. Over several days, it is likely that the student will spend less and less time until one day she may say, "I think I'm going to start a new style in class—quiet voice." The behavior was no longer any fun to perform.

Direct a student to Engage in the Behavior in a Different Location

This approach often can be used along with changing the amount of the behavior. An example of this combination approach would be setting up a whining chair. Whining is one of those behaviors that drives adults crazy. The more we point out to a student she is whining and ask her to stop, the more she whines. How many times have you told a student not to whine, only to have the student retort in an even more whiney voice, "I'm not whiiiiiiiiiiiiining!"

As in the previous approach, you enthusiastically and sincerely tell the student that there is a new place for whining called the whining chair, where she can get even better at whining. You express your confidence that her whining can improve, but that you're not sure how long it will take. As a result, whining is no longer fun, and the student is more likely to give it up—exactly what we want. Relatedly, administrators can use this same approach with their staff. The author has used this technique successfully with his undergraduate and graduate students who tend to whine toward the end of the semester when multiple projects are due simultaneously.

Schedule the Time for the Problem Behavior to Occur

A common problem teachers encounter are students who argue, tease, or otherwise irritate each other—especially when they are to be working. This problem can be remedied by setting aside a certain time for students to argue. A teacher might say to two students, "You two are arguing a lot lately. I have an idea that will stop your arguing or, at the least, help you get better at it. Everyday after school, you

two can sit across from each other at the table in my office. I'll set a timer for 30 minutes and you can both argue as much as you like."

This approach can be modified for students who swear in class. The teacher initially removes the student from the class to minimize disruptions. However, when class is over, the teacher (or principal) engages the student in the following dialogue:

I had no choice but to remove you from the classroom when you swore. It's one of the school rules. But I also know how much you enjoy swearing—especially at me. So I'm pretty excited with this idea. When I have some free time, I'll get you from whichever activity or class you're in, find a quiet room, and you can swear at me for 30 minutes.

It's crucial that when first talking to the student after class, you do so in a nonchalant way. You should not be stern nor reprimand him. That attitude will only give the student power and control by being able to push your buttons. Exuding a matter-of-fact way of behaving and also indicating you are pleased that the student has an opportunity to swear eliminates a power struggle.

You then approach the student during a desirable activity such as art class, P.E., lunch, or recess. The reason is because you want to increase the likelihood that he will say "No" to coming with you. Saying "No" reverses the context surrounding the behavior because normally you are telling him to stop swearing. Now he's saying he won't swear at you—exactly what you want! You can then say, "Okay, that's not a problem. I'll come and get you again when I have more free time to see if you want to swear at me." If, on the other hand, the student agrees to swear at you, then he is being compliant with your direction. In that case, find a quiet room, sit across from the student, set a kitchen timer for 30 minutes, and tell him to begin swearing. It won't take more than 30 seconds before he tires. When this happens, encourage him to continue. If he refuses, let him know that's okay and he can try again in the future to make 30 minutes of swearing.

There are other ways to modify this approach. For example, a teacher can say to a student, "I'm going to give you a direction to do something you won't want to do. So, I want you to whine and throw a tantrum now to get it over with before I give you the direction." This approach also works well with administrators' staff. At the beginning of a meeting, you may say to your staff, "I'm going to implement a new policy that will require you to change certain ways you currently teach. So I would like everyone to give me all the reasons it will be difficult to change before I tell you the new policy." This strategy is designed to beat staff to the punch. When you subsequently state the new policy and get excuses, you can then agree with them—thereby recasting the problem and demonstrating how the changes won't be as difficult as staff first thought.

Change the Appearance of the Behavior

This approach works well when a teacher is trying to tell a student something and she refuses to look at the teacher. Instead of getting upset, the teacher can instruct the student to place her hands over her ears to ensure she doesn't hear one word you say. If she follows the teacher's direction, she's being compliant. When compliance is obtained in one area it's easier to get it in another area. At the very least, the behavior is now under the teacher's control. If she refuses to place her hands over her ears, the teacher may comment that perhaps she wants to hear some of what is being said—and then the teacher can refuse to finish.

Changing Your Approach to Regain Control

Educators can manage students' resistance in a positive, effective fashion. But they may have to step outside their comfort zone and get creative in their responses to students' misbehavior. Here's a final example: A student, upon not getting her way in the classroom pitches a huge fit—a floor mopping tantrum with arms and legs waving madly. The teacher immediately drops to the floor and starts throwing a tantrum alongside the student. The student instantly stops her tantrum, stands up, and says “Ms. Gear, stop that right now!” Whether or not educators have this teacher's dramatic talents, the general lesson applies: Don't get stuck in frustrating patterns of reacting to students' resistance. Often you have more power than you think to change students' negative behavior.