

# Simple Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Students

*Create visual images to prompt behaviors you desire.*

## **P = Send POSITIVE messages.**

Notice the number of times you **state something negatively that could be stated in positive terms**. Promise with the positive by using *contingencies*, rather than *consequences*—which usually prompt negative feelings. Notice the difference between how the following two are perceived:

“As soon as you finish your work, you can go to the activity center.” (Contingency - stated in the positive)  
vs. “If your work is not done, you’re not going to the activity center.” (Consequence - stated negatively)

## **C = Offer CHOICES.**

**Choice empowers.** Choices give ownership, a critical component for **changing behavior**.

**Giving three options**—rather than two—removes all perceptions of coercion. Be it a situation, a stimulus, or an urge, *a person always has a choice regarding the response*. Don’t accept victim-type thinking that is counter-productive to fostering responsibility, e.g., “He hit me first!” “I had no choice!” and “He made me do it.”

## **R = Encourage REFLECTION.**

**Ask reflective questions** that foster growth and responsibility, e.g., “Are you willing to try something different?” “If you could not fail, what would you do?” “What would an extraordinary person do?”

**Be cautious of “why?” questions;** they allow the person to give an excuse, be a victim, and avoid responsibility. Besides, young people often do not know or find it difficult to articulate the reason they behave as they do.

- √ Have the student **practice the procedure** for doing the activity/lesson. Be sure that the student knows **what and how to do** what you have assigned.
- √ Rather than telling that the student is off task or telling the student what to do, **ask** the student to **reflect on the level of chosen behavior** of the **Raise Responsibility System's hierarchy**. See <[WithoutStress.com](http://WithoutStress.com)>.
- √ **Teach impulse control.** The conversation sounds something like, “Every time you stick your foot out to trip your friend, you are a victim of your impulses. *Do you really want to go through life being a victim?* If not, let’s establish a procedure so that when you get that impulse, you can **redirect it**. For example, **picture and feel** your foot chained to the floor. That image will help you to be **in control**, rather than be a victim of an impulse.” See Impulse Management <<https://withoutstress.com/product/tools-impulse-management-poster/>>
- √ No one comes to school to get into trouble. Think of students as **lacking skills** to handle impulses—or that the behavior is the student’s *best effort at the time to handle a frustration*. Few students are maliciously disruptive.
- √ **Reflect on your own goal.** You **goal will direct** how you handle the situation. If your desire is to **help** the student, then be willing to negotiate. There may be factors involved of which you are unaware.
- √ Students with short attention spans have a difficult time getting started on a task. Give **clear, concise, starting directions**, e.g., feet on the floor, **sternum up and out**, pencil and paper in proper position. Have students complete the following to themselves, “*The first thing I see myself doing is. . .*”
- √ When a student is off task or exhibits inappropriate behavior, be positive **by stating what you want**—not what you don’t want. Simply inform the student what you **would like** to see happen. This helps the student understand your desires and stops the student from engaging in one behavior only to engage in another, non-productive one.
- √ Use **labeling**. Teach students to **label any distraction** as “*distraction.*” Show students how to keep a record of them. Tracking distractions increases the likelihood that students will stop and think about what they are doing. This helps them reflect and make more appropriate choices.
- √ **Ask for the student’s help.** Put the problem to the student; let the student know that **you** don’t know how to solve the disruptive behavior. Asking for help taps into a natural desire to help others when in need.
- √ **Put the person in charge of the activity.** It is almost impossible to be in charge of stopping a disruption (e.g., continually getting off task in a group activity) if the person is in charge of preventing it.
- √ **Ask four questions that lead to a change in behavior:**
  - (1) “*What do you want?*” (2) “*Is what you are choosing to do helping you get what you want?*”
  - (3) “*If what you are choosing to do is not getting you what you want, then what is your plan?*”
  - (4) “*What is your procedure to implement your plan; specifically, what will you do?*”
- √ Have a **classroom meeting** and put the topic on the table.  
See <[https://withoutstress.com/pdf/Classroom\\_Meetings\\_Chapter.pdf](https://withoutstress.com/pdf/Classroom_Meetings_Chapter.pdf)>
- √ Teach **procedures**—rather than relying on rules.

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