

# The Idea: Defusing Argumentative Pupils

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## Why do pupils become argumentative?

All behaviour, whether it is appropriate or inappropriate, has a purpose behind it. Behaviour is an action that has been taken to fulfil some sort of personal need.

Challenging behaviour can arise for a variety of reasons. Some pupils will have had experiences (in or outside of school) which drive inappropriate behaviour; others will be reacting to an immediate situation. Argumentative behaviour can be motivated by triggers that include a need for power, a lack of self-confidence, a desire for revenge or a response to negative emotions, such as shame or frustration.

Sometimes, it will be impossible to identify the exact reasons for a pupil's argumentative behaviour. However, reminding ourselves that negative behaviour is a pupil's attempt to have their needs met can be very powerful; it helps adults to consider things from the child's perspective. It can also be a useful tool when trying to stay calm.

## When do pupils become argumentative?

Pupils can become argumentative at any time. Understanding that this behaviour is driven by unmet needs can help us to identify times when pupils are more likely to become argumentative. These can include situations when:

- they are struggling with their work and they want to divert attention away from this;
- they are bored and seeking stimulation;
- they are seeking to impress their peers and gain approval;
- they are wanting to feel that they have control;
- they are exploring boundaries and experimenting with what behaviours they can get away with;
- they are in need of attention and see poor behaviour as a strategy to achieve this quickly.

## How can we defuse argumentative pupils?

It is important to remember that arguments are not something that can be carried out alone. For a pupil to argue with a member of staff, the member of staff must participate.

In simple terms, the best way for a member of staff to prevent a pupil arguing with them is to refuse to engage in the argument altogether. In practical terms though, it is not always possible to avoid responding to the pupil entirely. In these situations, the strategies set out below will help the member of staff to respond to argumentative pupils appropriately.

### Create positive relationships

Building positive relationships with your pupils can help to prevent argumentative behaviour in the first place. When a member of staff knows their pupils, it helps them to anticipate and avoid triggers. When problems do arise, knowing your pupils well will help you to know how to deal with these issues, in a manner that each pupil will respond to.

### Teach pupils coping strategies

It is helpful to remember that some behaviours might be due to a skills deficit, rather than a pupil wishing to be defiant. Teaching pupils strategies, to help them to manage difficult emotions or to ask for help when they need it, can help to limit argumentative behaviour. These strategies can be taught to classes, groups or individuals, depending on the need.

## Control your response

Usually, a pupil's argumentative behaviour will not be personally directed at you, even though it might feel like it at the time.

Have a look at the list provided under 'When do pupils become argumentative?' and it is easy to recognise that most of these have little to do with the member of staff who is dealing with the behaviour.

It is important to stay calm, as reacting can motivate them to continue with the argument. Staff should control their body language, voice and proximity when interacting with argumentative pupils.

One strategy to help with this is to write scripts to use when responding to challenging behaviour. In his book, [When the Adults Change, Everything Changes](#), Paul Dix recommends writing 'universal microscripts' that you can rehearse and use when needed.

Stick to your school's behaviour policy and calmly remind the pupil of the agreed consequences. Having this as part of your script means that your response can become automatic and you are more likely to stay calm and respond appropriately.

## Minimise public negotiation and debate

Sometimes, pupils will use negative behaviour to get the attention that they crave. It is particularly important not to get into negotiation and debate in front of other pupils. This will only raise the stakes as they will not want to lose face with their peers by backing down. It will also reinforce the pupil's view that misbehaviour is an effective way of gaining adult attention.

If you do need to discuss an issue at length with a pupil, try to do this in private, away from other pupils. To avoid disrupting the lesson, you might have to agree to have this discussion at another time, e.g. after the lesson.

## Listen

Often pupils will just want to feel heard. You can minimise potential problems by listening to what they have to say. Once they have expressed their feelings, many pupils will start to calm down.

Try to offer them a private place to express their thoughts so it does not become a spectator event. Where possible, listen to them without interruption but limit the time that they have to do this.

## Offer alternatives

Some issues with behaviour arise from a pupil wanting to feel that they have control. Offer them this in a small way by providing acceptable options for them to choose from. This can help a pupil to feel empowered while still resulting in the outcome that you want to achieve.

For example, if a pupil is distracting others, you might say, "You know it is not acceptable to distract others from getting on with their work. Please could you either get on quietly or move to another seat where you won't be tempted to mess around."

## Draw a line under it

Once the behaviour issue has been resolved, try to avoid bringing it up again in the future. This will only cause resentment and break down your relationship with the pupil even further. Pupils need to feel that they can recover from any past mistakes and allowing them to start each day with a clean slate will reinforce this.

## This Will Help If...

- you have pupils who are being argumentative or defiant
- you want to avoid the negative impact of confrontations with pupils
- you need to prevent low level behaviour issues escalating into aggressive or violent incidents

## Start Your Research Here

Tom Bennett was commissioned by the Department for Education to undertake an independent review of behaviour in schools. Read about his findings [here](#).

Paul Dix offers a range of positive behaviour management strategies in his book [When the Adults Change, Everything Changes](#).

Sue Cowley explores strategies to help staff manage behaviour in her book [Getting the Buggers to Behave](#).

The National Education Union has produced a useful publication on [Positive behaviour management](#).

Twinkl have provided this useful guide on [de-escalation strategies](#).

## Action Points

### Reflect on your starting point

When developing any aspect of your practice, it is important to reflect on your starting point. In behaviour management, each individual will have different strengths and areas for development.

Ask yourself the following questions and make a note of your responses:

**Which classes/individuals/times do I sometimes struggle with? Why might this be?**

**Which pupil behaviours affect me emotionally? How do these impact my responses?**

**What skills do my pupils lack? How might this be impacting their behaviour?**

### Identify areas for development

Create a mind map, or list of ideas, for each of the following headings:

- Ways to improve my knowledge of my pupils
- Ways to develop positive relationships with my pupils
- Strategies that I could teach my pupils to prevent argumentative behaviour
- Strategies for controlling my response to negative behaviour

Use these ideas to create a personal action plan for developing your behaviour management.

### Script your responses

Think of a range of common behaviour challenges that you might face. Script calm and measured responses to these which reflect your school's behaviour policy. Rehearse and implement these scripts in your daily practice when needed.

### Evaluate your progress

Once you have gone through the steps above, take time to evaluate the progress you have made. Look at your responses to the questions you asked at the outset and consider what your response would be now. Take some time to celebrate your successes.

Repeat the process as many times as needed when you identify new areas for improvement.

## Source Material

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