
Passive Aggressive Behavior...

preventing and dealing with challenging behavior

This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This Tip Sheet was published by the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and was authored by Karen Smith of the Institute.

Introduction

Of all the particular types of behavior profiles which exist in students, passive-aggressive behavior is one which has most certainly led many teachers to their wit's end. This tip sheet looks at the characteristics of the passive-aggressive student, breaks down the process of how and why passive-aggressive behavior escalates, and offers suggestions for dealing effectively with passive-aggressive behavior.

What characterizes the passive-aggressive student?

Most teachers could, no doubt, describe the characteristics of a passive-aggressive student who has driven them to distraction. The first time a teacher encounters a passive-aggressive student, he or she often does not understand why the student frustrates him or her so much. However, once the teacher starts to recognize the manipulative behavior of the student, it will be possible to begin to effectively help the student to change his or her behavior.

Passive-aggressive students deal with their anger and frustration by eliciting these feelings in others, thereby appearing to be the victim of the other's irrational behavior. Typical characteristics of the passive-aggressive student are:

- passive listening: hearing only what they want
- slow-motion: moving very slowly when asked to go somewhere or complete a task
- purposeful forgetting
- "accidental" destruction
- frequently out of seat
- frequent behavior which is either inappropriate or exhibited at the wrong time
- cruel cut-downs
- constant complaining
- incomplete work if not constantly nagged

How do these behaviors compare between passive-aggressive and other students?

The passive-aggressive student exhibits these behaviors generally for two reasons: attention or expressing anger. During the student's development, he or she was either not given attention for appropriate behavior or was not taught ways of gaining attention through appropriate behavior or expressing anger effectively. Therefore, the student learned that attention could be effectively gained by annoying and provoking others in indirect ways "while appearing to be proper, polite, sorry, and confused by the teacher's behavior" (Berres & Long, 1979).

While the student's behavior at first glance may appear to be an attempt to avoid and escape tasks or activities, a closer examination of the behavior will reveal that it is the conflict resulting from the behavior which drives the student. It is that attention received from teachers and peers which reinforces the student's behavior, not the prospect of avoiding or escaping a disliked activity.

Why does the student seek attention in this manner?

As previously stated, the student has likely learned, over the course of his or her life, that he or she can quickly gain attention through this behavior. He or she was probably not reinforced for appropriate behavior and likely lacks the skills necessary to elicit positive attention.

Another reason students exhibit this behavior is that they lack self-esteem. They underestimate their potential, *as do their teachers and peers*. This negative perception is reinforced every time they behave in this manner. This leads to more negative perception by self and others, which continues the downward spiral.

Furthermore, passive-aggressive students may feel that it is not okay for them to express feelings of frustration and anger, which leads them to vent these feelings by manipulating and controlling other's emotions (something which they may very well have learned from someone else). These students "do not accept their own aggressive feelings, yet have a need to 'best' authority figures" (Beck, 1985).

What triggers passive-aggressive behavior and how does it escalate into conflict?

Student frustration triggers passive-aggressive behavior. Whether it is frustration with others or self, the student will begin to express this emotion indirectly by swearing, fidgeting, ripping up assignments, making noises, etc. The student wants the feeling to go away but does not know how to elicit positive attention, and, therefore, gets attention the quickest way that he or she knows how.

The student has now succeeded in gaining the attention of the teacher by annoying him or her. The teacher instinctively responds by reprimanding the student or asking him or her to cease the behavior which the student is using to gain attention.

This leads to the next phase of the cycle: student defensiveness. Although the student has gained attention he or she still feels pretty lousy and is not only frustrated but also angry. The student begins to lose control and verbally lashes out at the teacher, usually assuming the role of the victim: "You always pick on me," "Leave me alone," "I didn't do anything."

At this point, the teacher is probably angry, confused, and wants to re-establish that "the teacher is in control and will be listened to and obeyed at all costs." Through his or her "passive" acts, the student has succeeded in getting the teacher to aggress.

The student will now begin to exhibit more passive-aggressive behaviors until the teacher "lays down the law," which, although it is what ultimately ends the cycle, is what reinforces the student's belief that he or she is the victim and that adults unfairly take their anger out on students. The student and teacher reestablish some modicum of self-control. The teacher is left with feelings of failure, defeat, and confusion, while his or her negative feelings toward the student are, if not understood, reinforced. This leads to the probability that the teacher will respond more quickly and angrily to the student in the future, reinforcing the student's passive-aggressive behavior and leading to further deterioration of both student and teacher self-esteem.

How do I intervene with a passive-aggressive student?

Identify those behaviors which are inappropriate and perform a functional assessment. The functional assessment should indicate that the behavior is being reinforced by the delivery of attention to the student by others. *If the functional assessment does not indicate attention as being the motivating factor, you need to reevaluate whether the student is really passive-aggressive.*

After this, you need to look at your behavior. Specifically, examine how you have been dealing with the behavior, and evaluate whether your actions have contributed to the conflict and whether anything has seemed to de-escalate situations. One good reflection of what works and does not work are your feelings after a conflict. If you end up feeling helpless, powerless, angry, and confused, your methods have not worked and you should change them. If you end up feeling calm, the student has regained composure and you believe that they may have learned something to help improve behavior, your methods are an effective way of dealing with the student. In short, drop what is not working and identify methods which are working.

Next, make a list of those student behaviors which annoy you the most. Target the top three to five first. Along with this list, make another which outlines alternative behaviors which you would find acceptable. For example, if the functional assessment reveals that the student throws paper clips and taps her pencil after 10 or 15 minutes during which you have not interacted with her, you may list coming up to your desk or raising her hand as being a behavior you would find acceptable.

You also need to find a way to keep yourself emotionally calm and to protect yourself from being manipulated by the student when he or she begins to display these behaviors. Decide on several proactive interventions to use in teaching the student to change his or her behavior.

It can also be helpful to hold a conference with the student and, if possible, with the student's parents. Let the student know what is and is not acceptable and how you will help him or her to learn to behave appropriately.

Stick to and periodically evaluate your intervention. Keep in mind that it took the student a long time to learn these behaviors and it will likely take a long time to replace them with others. Do not let yourself fall into old patterns of reacting angrily.

Let the student know you care about him or her. Make it a point to give the student some brief friendly attention each day. Give the student the opportunity to talk about his or her feelings and provide reinforcement. Give the student special responsibilities and ensure that he or she knows what the expectations are by asking how the task will be completed. For example, if you ask the student to bring the roll call to the office ask, "How long do you think this should take you?", "Is it necessary to stop anywhere along the way (i.e., bathroom, other classrooms)?" This helps define and organize the task for the student, promoting success. Finally, reinforce all appropriate and thoughtful behavior, all appropriate bids for attention, and all acceptable expressions of anger and frustration.

It is important that the student learn that it is okay to feel frustrated and angry and that there are acceptable ways of expressing feelings. Furthermore, it is important to build the student's self-esteem by reinforcing him or her and encouraging the student to reinforce him or herself.

What proactive interventions are effective in changing passive-aggressive behavior?

Positive reinforcement is very important in improving the student's self-esteem and changing his or her self-perception. **Modeling** helps the student learn new behavior. **Token economies** can also be useful in motivating the student to change behavior. **Cooperative learning** gives student's the opportunity to learn from their peers. **Self-monitoring** can help a student assume more responsibility for his or her behavior. (See tip sheets with respective titles.)

How do I avoid being drawn into a conflict or get out of it once I recognize it?

Remember, these tactics are only to help you avoid or get out of a conflict cycle. They alone will not ultimately change the student's behavior. In order to do this, it is imperative that you perform a functional assessment and implement a long-term, proactive intervention plan, including techniques such as those listed earlier.

First, you must learn to not allow yourself to be manipulated emotionally. Once you have been emotionally drawn in by the passive-aggressive student, it is very difficult to regain composure. Use self-talk to tell yourself, "I know what the student is doing and why. It is not a personal attack against me, and I will remain calm while trying to help the student."

When you recognize the student displaying annoying, attention-seeking behavior, remember that this stems from frustration. The student needs support. If a student is working on a math assignment, you might approach the student by saying, "Ripping up math papers is not acceptable, John. Let's get you another and I'll sit down with you and we can work on it together." In this way, you are letting the student know that you do not accept his or her behavior but you are not nagging. You are also letting the student know that you care and want to help.

If the cycle has not been stopped at the frustration stage, you will have to deal with the next stage: defensiveness. At this point the teacher will need to set limits for the student. For example, if John refused to cooperate in getting another math paper and accepting assistance by stating, "Leave me alone, I don't need your help," the teacher might state, "Your math work needs to be completed. You may do it with or without me, but you need to get your math sheets, sit down, and work on them quietly. If you reach something you don't understand, you will raise your hand and ask me for help." In this case, you have defined the limits and left the decision up to the student as to whether he will or will not follow your instructions. You have also stepped out of a conflict cycle by remaining calm.

If the student persists and becomes passive-aggressive, the teacher needs to provide control. For example, if John gets a stack of math papers and proceeds to sit at his desk and loudly scribble on them, you might calmly say, "John, come with me," leave the room, and wait for him to follow. Do not give him the opportunity to argue with you and gain peer attention by waiting in the room. When you are alone, you could tell him, "Your behavior is unacceptable. You can either come and sit quietly in the class or you can sit here in the hall until you are able to control yourself. Either way, I need to attend to the other students in the class. We will talk about this after you show that you are in control by either sitting quietly here or in the classroom until I am ready to speak with you." The interaction is brief and should not reinforce the student's inappropriate behavior. It lets the student know that attention will be given for appropriate behavior.

How will I know that progress is being made to change the student's behavior?

The ultimate measure is the degree to which the student's behavior is maintained and generalized. The student may begin to behave acceptably in your classroom, but is he or she improving in other classrooms/situations? More often than not, passive-aggressive students see authority figures as the enemy. This can be confronted by having a private conference with the student. You may begin by talking about all the progress and positive change you have seen. Let him or her know that you see that he or she can continue to have more and more success, but that this will be difficult if teachers, etc., are seen as enemies and treated suspiciously. Engage the student in a conversation about what generally happens to students (or people in general) who do and do not cooperate with teachers and other authority figures and rules. Remain calm and courteous so that you display that you do care and that you do want the student to succeed. Finally, let the student know that it is up to him or her to decide which way they will deal with this final step. Do not expect the student to make a decision then and there. It may take time, so continue to be caring and courteous, modeling a friendly authority figure.

Not every student will make that final leap and it is, indeed, something which the student must decide for him or herself. Continue to be consistent with the student and do not hold yourself responsible for the student's decisions. Remember that there are many other areas in the student's life (home, friendships, etc.) which exert great influence over the student and over which you have no control.

One thing you can continue to do, no matter what, is to continue working with the student to build his or her self-esteem. This may help the student to choose to see authority figures as people who can help and to see him or herself as worthy and entitled to this help. Positive reinforcement, being given special responsibilities in the classroom, and tutoring peers (*see tip sheet entitled "Peer Tutoring"*) are all ways to help build student self-esteem.

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