

Chapter 5

Stop Arguments In Their Tracks “He’s Always Arguing. How Do I Get Him To Stop?”

Do you feel guilty when your student gets a negative consequence?

Breathe easy. Negative consequences are a fact of life. In this section, we’ll show you how to harness their power.

Myth Of Self-Esteem

There’s a new revolution afoot we’ll call the “self-esteem movement.” Its founding principle is that the only acceptable feedback for kids is positive feedback. I’ll give you an example. In the good ‘ol days, only first-place teams and players would get trophies or ribbons at the end of a sports season. Sometimes second- and third-place athletes got a pat on the back or even a tiny ribbon. But that was it.

Go to a postseason soccer-league banquet these days, and you’re in for a shock. Every player on every team, even the one that went winless and didn’t score a goal, gets a trophy. The reason: We don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. Is that real life? No! If your supervisor picks your co-worker’s proposal over your own, is he going to give you the same raise and promotion as your colleague? Of course not!

I won’t bore you with the mundane details, but the bottom line is that research proves the praise-only and praise-always approach doesn’t work. Well-intentioned that the self-esteem movement may be, its efforts actually backfire. Praising all the time without providing a reality check only creates laziness and entitlement. Children not only put out less effort; they actually wind up feeling worse about themselves.

If you are going to praise your student, it’s better to praise the “effort” than the “intelligence.” Students who get frequent praise for their intelligence feel they don’t need to put forth any more effort, partially for fear they’ll fail. Children who are praised for their effort, though, will put out more believing they can achieve a higher goal next time.

The other problem with the self-esteem movement is it frowns upon anything that slightly resembles a negative consequence. Folks in the movement see Time Out and scolding as unnecessary and harsh.

Truth is, we cannot live by positives alone any more than we can live by negatives alone. We need a blend. As we mentioned earlier, we do need more positives than negatives. But we still need negatives.

Let’s say the Internal Revenue Service could impose no negative consequences (fines, prison terms, audits) if you failed to pay your taxes. And let’s say its only method for motivating you to pay your taxes was to send you a postcard stamped with a smiley face after you sent in your return. How many people do you figure would pay their taxes on time

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every year? There are some things in life that just require a negative consequence to get us motivated.

Negative consequences are not the devil's work. Used reasonably and appropriately, they inspire kids to grow better than anything else would or could.

Clip it.

Ever play tennis against a wall? You never win.

At first, it's not too bad. But after a few moments, you realize that the ball's going to keep coming back no matter how hard you hit or how much spin you put on it.

That's essentially what happens when we argue with defiant young students.

When I ask teachers why kids argue, they tell me their students either want something or they want to avoid doing something.

When I ask teachers why they argue back, they tell me they're trying to explain the rationale behind their decision in terms that their kids will easily understand.

Problem is, we tend to reason with our students for long periods of time – in the hopes that they will get it. Whether we realize it or not, we're making these elaborate explanations because we truly believe we'll stumble upon some perfect pearl of wisdom that will create an epiphany between their ears.

In a calmer moment, we adults would probably agree that nothing we say is going to reach students at a time like this. Clearly, students argue for one reason, and we return fire with an altogether different motive.

Both teacher and student are playing tennis, and both players are so determined and talented that neither is going to give up. The game could go on forever. But the bottom line is this: the students win either way. If they don't wear you down and get you to give in, then at least they were able to share their frustration by annoying you.

Ah, but there is a better solution. All we've got to do, metaphorically, is walk off the court. We can do this by making our students realize that arguing is pointless.

Teenagers are quite the experts at arguing. Watch two adolescent girls argue, and you'll notice that the conflict usually ends when one rolls her eyes, says "Whatever!" and walks off. After that, the argument is over. The two girls don't talk anymore, at least for awhile.

As teachers, we can follow this example, only we can use a more respectful attitude.

The best way to do this is by using "Brain-Dead Phrases." Here are a few examples:

- **"Good try"**
- **"Thanks for letting me know how you're thinking about that"**
- **"Sorry you feel that way"**
- **"Could be so"**
- **"I see"**
- **"It's good to want things"** – (my personal favorite)

Delivering these brain-dead phrases in the right way is just like removing the backboard, which will accomplish two things:

- 1) It will give your student a clear signal that you won't be drawn into any fruitless discussions; and
- 2) It will give your student the privilege of figuring things out for himself.

Remember, if the tennis ball isn't coming back with a satisfying response from the backboard, we all realize pretty quickly that hitting another ball would be pointless. Even if the student asks what appears to be a legitimate question, you do not have to answer. He already know the answer and is just laying a trap in hopes you'll bite. Don't!

Pop Quiz

Question: How do I stop a full-blown meltdown or temper tantrum?

Answer: You'd be surprised how often we get this question. A child or adolescent gets upset and starts a full-blown tantrum with kicking, cussing ... you name it. Not fun. And there's really nothing you can do once a kid is in the middle of it.

It's ugly, isn't it? And unfortunately, the best way to illustrate this next point is with perhaps even a more unpleasant and graphic image. What happens when a kid gets an upset stomach and starts throwing up? Ever had that happen in your classroom? Is there anything you can do to help the student stop? The unfortunate answer is no, of course not.

Pretty much all you can do in the short term is allow nature to run its course and to help clean it up. But in the long term, you can help them prevent this from happening again. Say the kid had too much junk food, and that led to the upset stomach. You can help the student make better food choices in the future.

You're pretty much in the same predicament when it comes to a tantrum. Once a kid gets started, nothing you do or say is going to end it before its time, but you can take steps to make sure it doesn't happen again. You'll learn about some of these steps in the following chapters. One of the best we've found is in Chapter 6 (Practice Academies), and there's a related handout in the Appendix.

Your job is to help your kids build the skills they need to avoid an equally unpleasant scenario later.

Worksheet 5.1

Instructors: Basically, teachers love this exercise and have no objections or problems. They just need practice because this can't be studied theoretically. You have to practice this. So have the teachers practice these phrases with each other at lunch or in the teacher's lounge at least once a day. Not only is it fun, but it will be easier for them to use and access in the classroom once it becomes more of a habit.

Again, the biggest concern is addressed at the end of this section, "But how do I get him to do his work?" Teachers expect that something they say or a phrase will cause an immediate turnaround in that pain-in-the-rear student. Obviously, it doesn't happen that way and it won't, but the struggle will stay in the student's head and not play out between the student and the teacher. This will preserve their relationship. This point needs to be reinforced and repeated with teachers usually.

Go "Brain-Dead"

Choose a common argument you have with students in your classroom. Over the next few minutes, let's play it out in a controlled environment.

1. First, let's choose a scenario that you want to play out (Example: Student tries to talk his way out of getting detention).
2. Now, pick two teachers. One can play the role of "the student," and the other will be "the teacher".
3. Next, the "student" argues his case while the "teacher" defends her position. The argument can last a few minutes while the "teacher" tries to evoke some sort of understanding from her "pupil."

Instructors: have teachers argue the old way by trying to use logic and explanations. Do not let them use Brain-Dead Phrases here.

4. After it's obvious that this is going nowhere, decide as a group which of the two ("student" or "teacher") is doing the most *thinking* and which is in *control*. Hint: one is doing the thinking and the other is in control, but neither can be both. If you are still stuck ask yourself, "who is on autopilot– student or teacher?" Whoever is on autopilot is definitely in control.

5. Next, try another scenario. The student will use the same exact argument as was used in the first round. Only this time, the teacher will use Brain-Dead phrases – either from the list above or some of his/her own.

6. Now, who is doing the thinking and who is in control? Which scenario did more damage to the relationship?

7. Come up with several other situations that you commonly face in the classroom and list them below.

8. Note with each scenario whether you think Brain-Dead phrases were helpful or not.

9. Remember, just because you use these phrases does not mean that your student will comply, only that the arguments will stop.

This is one of the more frustrating situations for teachers. They often ask me, “But how do you get the student to do his homework, or (whatever the problem is)?”

When using Brain-Dead Phrases, don’t expect your defiant pupil to stop dead in his tracks and immediately change course. Instead, you want to shift the course of the argument. Using these phrases will shift the argument from between you and the student to just within the student. Hence, arguing won’t be as satisfying or rewarding. I’ve heard many kids say that they used to argue with adults but stopped because the grown-ups stopped arguing back, and what’s the fun in that?

Also, by using these phrases you aren’t damaging your relationship with the student anymore. You may not be enhancing it, but arguing is nothing short of a “relationship destroyer.”