

# Chapter 1

## Five Kids, Five Different Motivations

I'd like to introduce you to five kids. All of them can terrorize a classroom, and it's tempting to think each one is doing it just to get under your skin. Sometimes that's the case. Often it's not.

As you meet these students, open your mind to the idea that there might be more to their misbehavior than trying to undermine you.

First there is **Devon**, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader who's in an alternative program - not because of his academics but because of his behavior. His teachers have tried relentlessly to get the assistance of his parents, but his mother is fed up with calls from school and tells teachers Devon is their problem and that they need to fix him. "After all," she adds, "I don't call the school for help when there are problems at home."

Devon loves to misbehave, and his favorite trick is the "shut down." That's the absolute refusal to do any work, or any work he doesn't want to do. Even with a lot of teacher assistance and encouraging, he flatly refuses to do any work. Back in his regular classroom, he will blurt out, be the class clown or just outright disrespect his teachers. Some of the other kids think he is cool, which just reinforces his misbehavior. The problem is he's behind academically and struggling.

Fearful of losing his "cool" status, Devon assumes the motto of "it is better to be bad than stupid." Fearing academic failure in the classroom, he learned early on to misbehave in order to cover up his weakness. We'll call Devon the "Shutdown Kid."

Next up is **Kevin**. He's a bright kid. Honest. He's totally at ease in class and seems to have it all together. Ask a complex question in class, and if he's in the mood, he'll answer it. He won't raise his hand, though. He might even wait until a few classmates answer incorrectly. Then he'll just blurt out the right answer and roll his eyes to show how dumb he thinks the other kids are.

The problem with Kevin is that he won't play by the rules you lay down, or he'll argue incessantly about them. You can threaten all the punishments you want, you can send him to the principal or in-school suspension a dozen times, and he'll still throw paper airplanes (likely of a very sophisticated design) while classmates read their book reports.

"He's so smart," his teacher asks, "so why doesn't he get it?"

Oh he gets it all right. He's what I call a "Wanna-be gangsta" - a kid who rebels just for the fun of it.

Then there's **Robert**. He loves Pokemon. You know this because he talks about it constantly. This wouldn't generally be problem, except he's in fifth grade and too old to be interested in a little kid's show. Even the nicest kids in class try politely to tell him they'd rather talk about some other subject, but he just doesn't get it.

If he's not talking about his favorite cartoon series, this guy rails on and on (and on and on) about the class rules he considers unfair.

He will do his schoolwork, but he cannot stand to be interrupted before he's finished. Try

to stop him while he's in the middle of anything, and he'll argue or explode at you. To say he doesn't like moving from one project to another would be putting it mildly.

He's what I call a "Rebel without a clue" because you have talked to him time and time again and even then he'll be arguing over the same inconsequential point.

Next is **Sally**. Most of the time, she sits quietly in class. She does her work on time, doesn't intentionally antagonize her neighbors and follows virtually any instruction you give her ... except when something sets her off. And that happens way too often.

At least once a week, with absolutely no warning, she implodes right in the middle of class. As you're explaining sentence structure or a mathematical formula or why Texas was at war with Mexico in the 1830s, Sally jumps out of her chair and begins screaming at the boy sitting behind her. Turns out the poor guy was just gently tapping his pencil on his desk, so she stood up and blew him away.

Fact of the matter is, nothing's wrong with Sally's IQ, and she's not acting up just to get a rise out of you. When she gets emotional, she loses anything that resembles a thought process ... like we all do. It's called "emotional hijacking." But Sally isn't like anybody else. She's definitely not like Kevin or Robert. She's what I call a "Roadside Bomb."

Finally, we come to **Brett**. This kid is no fun. He's been diagnosed as clinically depressed, but you don't buy it. He doesn't walk around with his head down, moping and crying all the time. No, his so-called depression comes out in even worse ways than that.

Brett has a very high IQ. He's bright, and he knows it. He considers himself smarter than everyone. That means he'll back-talk you all day long because he feels he has a right to.

He is convinced that others, especially adults, are on this planet to make his life miserable. To make matters worse, he doesn't see a problem and has no motivation to work on his depression or his behavior. As he explained it, he wouldn't be depressed if it wasn't for the "mouth-breathing droolers" running his school.

He ended up getting kicked out of a private school and now attends public school where he continues to have discipline problems.

For kicks, we'll call him "Punk Genius."

### **What's Wrong With Them? Why Don't They Get It?**

If you've been in the teaching business very long, you've met all these kids before. They probably had different names, and their specific misbehaviors were likely a bit different, but Devon, Kevin, Sally, Robert and Brett have a lot in common with some of the most challenging kids you've faced.

What you may not have realized, though, is that not all of them are acting this way just so they can get under your skin and drive you batty. And I propose to you that none of these kids – and no kid in your classroom – stays up at night concocting ways to ruin your day. It sure feels like it though, doesn't it?

That's especially true when it comes to students like Kevin. It's true, he is trying to push your buttons. He's not just a smart kid – he's way ahead of everyone else in the class. So one way he gets challenged is by playing mind games with you. The root of his motivation

is his desire for control and stimulation.

I guarantee he's not doing it for the sole reason of annoying you.

Neither are Devon, Sally, Robert or Brett.

Devon just doesn't want anyone to know his weaknesses, so he hides his shortcomings behind a façade of coolness.

Robert and Brett have legitimate psychological disorders that happen to be expressed in obnoxious ways.

Most of the time, Sally's a decent student with a decent attitude. She pops off once in a while for no apparent reason. But in cases like her's, please believe she's not trying to make your life hell. It might sound trite, but she loses any semblance of judgment when she gets emotional.

See the difference?

On the next page is an exercise to get you thinking differently.

# Worksheet 1.1:

## Are These Kids All The Same?

It's tempting to think all kids misbehave for the same reason. After all, their antics make you feel the same way. Whether you're dealing with a "Roadside Bomb," "Rebel Without a Clue," "Shutdown Kid" or "Punk Genius," your heart rate increases. Your blood boils. Every fiber of your being wants to wring the kid's neck. Since they all press the same buttons, they must be doing it for the same reason, right?

I implore you: Don't fall into that trap. We can't make things better if we don't first take the time and energy to figure out the various reasons why they're misbehaving. The three main categories are neurological (such as Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD) behavioral (such as strong-willed or Oppositional Defiant Disorder, entitled and spoiled kids) and emotional (such as depression and anxiety).

In the space below, list three problematic students you've come across over the years. Next to each student's name, write down a few troubling behaviors (Examples: class clown, refusing to do work, excessive arguing).

Next, write down whether you think they are doing this because of neurological, behavioral, or emotional reasons. Each child can also have a combination of reasons, but put them in the order that you believe has the most influence.

---

**Instructors:** *It is important to not only identify problem students, which usually is not a problem, but the reasons or primary motivation behind these misbehaviors. It is all too common for teachers to quickly assign spoiled, entitled, or strong-willed to a child's misbehavior. The purpose of this exercise is to get them thinking more flexibly than 'he's doing this on purpose, I just know' mentality.*

*This exercise/worksheet is different from the rest in that there is no skill practiced. It is solely for the purpose of getting teachers out of their rut of thinking that every misbehavior is an intentional power struggle. By assigning students to different categories, teachers are opening up to the possibility of different motivations occurring with each child, and therefore taking a different approach besides instinctively falling back on the ones they have learned or been using.*

---