

# The Influence of Play Therapy on Classroom Management

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*Effective classroom management is not simply about intervention strategies. A positive teacher-student relationship is essential for both responding to and preventing behaviour issues. This article summarizes current thinking on classroom management, provides information and research supporting the importance of the teacher-student relationship and presents a sample of effective strategies for managing classroom behaviours.*

## Introduction

Teachers are reporting both increased stress and job dissatisfaction as government funding cuts reduce teaching and teaching assistant positions and conversely increase class size. As such, there is greater responsibility on the teacher to manage their classroom effectively with less support from the school and the district and often inadequate classroom management training in teacher education programs.

So what is effective classroom management? It involves effective teaching, an engaging teacher-student relationship and practical strategies. Tauber (2007), in his book *Classroom Management*, discusses six respected discipline models, related theory and strategies. The primary objection by teachers to the use of externally-suggested interventions is that it disrupts teaching and thus learning. A practical strategy, therefore, is one that is effective with responding to student misbehaviour without disrupting teaching and learning.

How does play therapy relate to classroom management? Play therapists are often asked by schools for intervention recommendations to manage the classroom behaviour of their clients. Thus, it is important for therapists to understand effective classroom management. Play therapists are already trained in areas that are relevant to classroom management. These include relationship development, empathic interaction, limit setting and parenting skills. Some classroom management models have evolved from parenting models. This makes sense since both parenting and teaching involve a relationship to the child and both

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share common goals of increased child compliance and reduced parent/teacher stress. Although, most would agree that managing behaviour in the classroom is much more difficult than parenting.

Classroom management is implemented by the teacher but also needs to be supported by the school and district administration. For example, a school district in Indiana mandates that all teachers new to the district complete a weeklong training on classroom management based on the Tools for Teaching model.

### **Effective Teaching**

Classroom management needs to start with effective teaching. Effective teaching can be described as engaging teaching that makes students want to be in the classroom and want to be learning. Fred Jones (2007), author of *Tools for Teaching*, emphasizes that discipline prevention is much less costly to the school and requires effective, engaging and enthusiastic teaching. Tauber (2007) notes that engaged students learn more and misbehave less. William Glasser (1998), author of *Quality Schools*, asserts that for classroom management to be successful, students need to "perceive school as a good place to be." This is accomplished through effective teaching and positive teacher-student relationship.

### **Teacher-Student Relationship**

It is the relationship between the teacher and student that determines whether a strategy will succeed. The most important adult in a child's life is his/her parent and the second most important adult is often the child's teacher. Guerney and Flumen (1970) note that "The teacher has inherent importance to the child, spending up to 30 hours a week with the child." They go on to say that "due to a pre-established relationship, a teacher can be even more effective than a therapist in reaching the child's emotional world" (Brown, 2000). Teacher-student attachment is inherent in the learning process and teachers should leverage it to accomplish learning and discipline goals. It is important to be proactive in relationship building and it is the teacher's responsibility (Jones, 2007). Prevention is key to classroom management. Thomas Gordon (2003), author of *Teacher Effectiveness Training*, notes that "If you solve the relationship problem, you solve the misbehaviour problem." Jim Fay (2002), author of *9 Essential Skills of the Love and Logic Classroom*, similarly notes that "it's clear that most experienced teachers view the ability to develop positive relationships, trust, and rapport as being the most important, crucial skill for reaching challenging students."

Child-centered play therapy and filial therapy approaches have a lot to offer school staff. Filial therapy, developed by Bernard and Louise Guerney, teaches parents specific parent-child interaction skills, based on child-centered play therapy, that enhance the attachment between parent and child. This model has been shown to be effective at reducing problematic behaviour and parenting stress. Teachers, similarly, who foster an engaging, positive teacher-student relationship report reduced stress and student misbehaviour.

Literature and research specifically on the application of filial therapy to the teacher-student relationship is available. Christopher Brown, in his doctoral dissertation, studied the impact on teachers and students of providing teachers Child-Teacher Relationship Training (CTRT). CTRT, developed by Helker, Ray, Bratton, Morrison (2006), is based on Child-Parent Relationship Therapy, a 10-session filial therapy

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model (Landreth & Bratton, 2006). Helker and Ray (2009) conducted research on the efficacy of Child-Teacher Relationship Training in the pre-school environment. Their findings show that “the more teachers demonstrated relationship-building responses, children’s externalizing problems were reduced as part of a reciprocal relationship.” (Helker & Ray, 2009). Further research on the efficacy of filial therapy in middle and high school would be beneficial.

The importance of the teacher-student relationship is also supported by Ross Greene (2008) in his Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) model applied to the classroom. He makes the argument that traditional school discipline programs don't teach skills or resolve problems and that lagging cognitive skills and unresolved problems underlie students challenging behaviour (Greene, 2008). Daniel Siegel (1999) talks about the importance of relationships in the brain’s development. He notes that “Emotion regulation is initially developed from within interpersonal experiences in a process that establishes self-organizational abilities” (Siegel, 1999). Students with high emotional regulation and ability to organize demonstrate fewer behaviour issues in classrooms.

Bruce Perry (2006) discusses the hierarchy of brain function from simple (brainstem) to complex (neocortex). He explains how the brain of a student experiencing “emotionally charged content” will shift states to brainstem-driven (Perry, 2006). Jones (2007) refers to Triune Brain Theory to explain similarly how the brain response of an upset student is to “downshift” from the neocortex to the brainstem. The implication is that a teacher’s attempt to rationally intervene with the student will likely be ineffectual. The initial intervention needs to be consistent with lower brain function and relationally-based until the student’s brain function returns to the neocortex level.

A significant benefit of filial therapy training to parents is greater understanding of the meaning of child behaviour. This is also relevant to teachers. There are numerous reasons why children misbehave in class and these may include: learning disorder, sensory integration dysfunction, cognitive deficits, mental health issues, family issues, and trauma victimization. Understanding the meaning of a student's misbehaviour allows for more appropriate and effective classroom interventions. Rudolf Dreikurs (2004), in his Social Discipline model, suggests that "good discipline recognizes that students have needs and engage in behaviors – sometimes antisocial behaviors – that they believe can help them meet their unmet needs. Teachers should help students recognize their needs (i.e. their goals) and then help them select more appropriate behaviors to achieve these goals." This is consistent with the Collaborative Problem Solving model that suggests that the teacher’s job is to help the student develop lacking skills (Greene, 2008). It is also consistent with Choice Theory that says basic human needs determine student choices and choices are guided by student's perception of unmet yet important needs (Glasser, 1998).

## Strategies

As previously stated, strategies need to be practical in the sense that the teacher can implement them without disrupting the teaching process. Strategies also need to be specific rather than general. Teachers want to know “what do I do when the student... .” Jones (2007) notes that “Time and energy are finite. All of the time and energy that goes into discipline management comes out of instruction.” He also believes that the priority is discipline; the teacher needs to respond to discipline issues as they occur in

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such a way that learning is not disrupted. He notes that an effective intervention is one that results in better behaviour, more learning, and less hassle for the teacher (Jones, 2007).

Two key interaction skills from child-centered play therapy and filial therapy are empathic listening and therapeutic limit setting. Andronico and Guerney (1969) suggest that these two skills in particular would be beneficial to teachers. (Brown, 2000).

### ***Empathic Listening***

Empathy, according to Jim Fay (1995), “allows the child to stay calm enough to solve the problem.” Greene notes that the “goal of the empathy step is to achieve the best possible understanding of a kid’s concern or perspective related to a given problem. Like adults, kids have legitimate concerns: approval, ... desire not to be embarrassed ...” (Greene, 2008). Empathy has the benefit of deescalating the student and increasing the chance of resolution. Empathic listening, as specified in child-centered play therapy, is about reflecting back what the child is saying, doing and feeling.

### ***Limit Setting***

Limit setting skills practiced by play therapists, whether following the Landreth or Guerney approach, use a specific and succinct model of responding to misbehaviour without sacrificing the relationship. It is the latter aspect that facilitates compliance in the long-term. The problem with an autocratic approach is that it often only motivates short-term compliance not long-term change. The Guerney’s approach utilizes the three steps of set the limit, give a warning and enforce the consequence.

### ***Steps to Teacher Response***

The steps to a teacher’s response to misbehaviour, based partially on Teaching with Love and Logic (Fay, 1995), include: (1) lead with empathy; (2) validate feelings; (3) give the problem back to the student; (4) assist the student with identifying choices; and (5) turn and walk away with the assumption of compliance. Walking away is about giving the student room to save face and to make a choice. Fay (1995) and Geddes (2002), suggest that compliance goes way up when the teacher walks away rather than standing over the child waiting for him/her to choose.

### ***Match Teaching Style to Learning Style***

Students have different primary learning styles (auditory, visual, doing) and teachers utilize different teaching styles. It would make sense that a child whose primary learning style is doing (kinaesthetic, tactile) would have difficulty attending in a class where the teacher's primary teaching style is auditory. The better the match, the more children attend, learn, and behave. Tools for Teaching refers to this as Say, See, Do Teaching that targets auditory, visual and doing learning styles. Jones (2007) stresses that teachers use all three “modalities” simultaneously. He points out that this “understanding of learning” is noted in the following Chinese proverb: I hear, and I forget; I see, and I remember; I do, and I understand (Jones, 2007).

## Conclusion

Effective classroom management involves effective teaching, a positive teacher-student relationship and practical and specific strategies. When achieved, effective classroom management results in significant benefits. Teachers report reduced stress, increased job satisfaction, reduced student misbehaviour, and improved learning.

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