

Managing difficult behaviour in colleges



A practical guide by **Tom Bennett**

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Foreword

Welcome to *Managing difficult behaviour in colleges and further education institutions*, UNISON's practical guide for support staff working in colleges.

UNISON represents a diverse range of college employees from learning support workers, technicians and trainers, through to IT, human resource, catering and cleaning staff, facilities managers and many more, all of whom work with, or alongside, students to some extent.

We know that UNISON members in colleges share a desire to do the best for further education students and to ensure that they have the best possible experience in the best possible environment – and we want to help them do that.

UNISON is also committed to supporting and improving our members' working lives by providing resources and training relevant to their roles. We recognise that working in a college, as in any educational environment, presents challenges. And that's why we are delighted that behaviour management specialist Tom Bennett has written this clear and accessible guide to help you in your college job. We hope you find this advice to be of value to you.

Jon Richards
UNISON national secretary



Introduction

When we work with other people we instantly enter into a relationship with them, whether we like it or not. People react to us and we react to them; we form judgements about them and they do about us. The quality of our interactions makes a huge difference to our ability to work together productively.

It makes sense for every professional working with adults and young people to be as aware as possible about how they manage their own behaviour and the behaviour of others. Simply asking someone to do something doesn't guarantee that they will do it. Just because someone is supposed to do something doesn't mean that they'll do what they said they would.

In further education institutions we interact with different people countless times every day. Each person has their own hopes, agendas, ambitions, histories and personal lives. We often want the same thing; we often want different things.

But as professional staff working in an institution we need to focus on working together to achieve goals that help us all. This guide will outline some of the most useful ways we can try to positively influence the behaviour of others, whoever they are.

Good luck!

Tom Bennett
Independent behaviour advisor to the Department of Education

Working together

Human beings are remarkably social beings. We enjoy the company of others who share our goals and values. Even the most solitary of people often find their 'tribe' in other ways – through social media, clubs, and so on.

We have an instinctive need to belong, to be part of something. But we also have a need to be distinct, to be different, to stand out. These two instincts play out quite intensely in the teenage years, but they remain a tension throughout most of our adult lives.

Such is the environment of a further education institution. In college we might only interact with any one person for a short period of time and this can mean that we have a small window in which to convince someone to act one way rather than another.

There are many daily interactions where it is necessary to ask people to do (or not do) things: move, stay still, help, hold a door, hand in an essay, clear a table and so on. And these are just the common interactions, we may also be engaged in more difficult interactions.

There are also more unusual circumstances where staff are expected to deal with threatening, aggressive, or simply non-compliant behaviour. When we deal with large groups of people we immediately expose ourselves to challenges that we need to be prepared for. If we are not, then at best we increase the difficulties of our days, at worst we risk harm or abuse.

UNISON is committed to protecting its members from these dangers, as well as encouraging members to promote healthy and productive behaviours that encourage others to do so. This benefits everyone and ensures that young people, in particular, can get the best out of their education.

Why don't they just behave?

The further education environment presents a number of answers to the question: Why don't they just behave? Principally, because the demographics of students come from such a wide variety of circumstances. Practically all ages and stages are represented, each with their own challenges and turmoil.

Young people, for example, exist at the centre of an unusual cocktail of pressures, both internal and external. Physically many of them are still in the throes of the chemistry of change that roars through their bodies and brains. Mentally and emotionally they often wrestle with monumental battles and disputes within themselves. Who am I? What is my purpose? Who are my friends? What are my ambitions?

At the same time there are enormous external pressures for many: the discovery of a home beyond the familial home; the need for employment; and learning new skills in a very different environment.

With those pressures alone, it is easy to see why many young people feel overwhelmed by their circumstances: given adult responsibilities, but lacking the social and emotional tools to manage them properly; allowed freedoms they have never before exercised.

To put it another way, many students look like adults but still think like children in some ways. They are wrestling with the tension between being responsible for themselves and the natural selfishness that we often experience at this young age. Such struggles can remain well into adulthood. Sometimes such conflicts are never fully resolved.

The quest for personal identity is both universal and timeless. No two people are identical, and students are individuals with their own histories and habits. But the tension between what they probably should be doing and what they would like to be doing is a very live one. At school they might have been shuttled around and escorted from class to class, given little free time, and carefully monitored and mentored.

In further education so much more is expected of young people and many are also, for the first time, working on placements or apprenticeships. We

should always be aware of the demands we place on them. In fact, it is essential never to forget this, while at the same time having high expectations of them all. And ourselves.

Some students have come to further education from circumstances that are less than ideal. For example:

- They may have had an **unsatisfactory relationship with authority** in their previous schools or institutions. These memories don't leave us easily, and students may have developed a reflex of mistrust or resistance to being directed or driven by anyone.
- They may have experienced **low levels of success** at school and associate learning as something to be endured rather than enjoyed.
- Their **home circumstances may be fractured** in some way, or they may have home responsibilities that weigh heavily on their capacity to commit to their education.

None of these circumstances can be tackled directly or changed quickly. Rather, the job of staff is to reinforce the idea that where they are is a safe and welcoming space that offers them benefits they cannot access elsewhere. Staff should at all times be positive, sincere, and treat one another with dignity and consideration. These are not empty words — students respond enormously to warmth, sincerity and people who appear to be capable of trust. These features aren't just important to having high expectations and being professional — they are essential to it.

Establishing positive relationships

All relationships take time to build, there are no short cuts to getting people to respond well to your directions. There are, however, ways that this kind of relationship can be built as quickly as possible.

Top tips for establishing positive relationships with young people

Set out the kind of behaviour you expect as clearly and as quickly as possible.

Set out your expectations as clearly and as quickly as possible. Clarity of expectations is vital. After all, students may simply not understand what you expect of them and non-compliance may simply be confusion. The best way to avoid confusion is to make all directions and instructions to them **clear, concise and concrete**. In a room of 20 students, even the instruction 'be quiet' can mean different things and range from absolute silence to stage whispers to conversational voices.

Regardless of context, try to be positive and warm.

Professional warmth goes a long way in disarming people's fears and anxieties. It is also the best way to avoid creating an atmosphere where messages can be misinterpreted. Positivity is also important in how we address students, that is to say, constantly communicating the belief that the student is capable of behaving well and succeeding – rather than hollow insincerity.

As far as practical, ask for what you would like students to do, rather than what not do.

This helps to avoid the situation where students are focused on misbehaviour. Instead it encourages them to focus on better habits. For example say 'Walk, please' instead of 'Don't run'.

Avoid sarcasm.

The advice to avoid sarcasm may grate with some people, especially those who like to use humour and irony as ways to defuse tension. In truth, these can be useful strategies, but usually only in circumstances where relationships are already strong, and misinterpretation or offence can be avoided or unpacked easily.

As a default, when dealing with large groups of relative strangers, it is safest to start with sincerity, and then work towards the subtler arts of conversation.

Always say what you mean, then do it.

Actions speak louder than words. While it is easy to exaggerate for effect, or to invoke a threat, there are diminishing returns from this strategy. Students quickly learn who is insincere and who is not. Sincerity and reliability are key to building effective relationships based on trust. This in turn makes your communication more effective, as students learn that your words are always matched with actions. To put it another way, students learn quickly who exaggerates and who does not; who makes idle threats and who is full of hot air.

Give and expect dignity.

In colleges, everyone is important. Everyone has a different role, and everyone is entitled to the dignity that should be afforded to every human being. It goes without saying that all members of a community should value themselves. If we deny students that consideration and treat them as if they do not, it is unsurprising that some will reciprocate with similar levels of defiance. If, however, we talk to and treat others with the dignity we expect for ourselves, then there is at least the chance that they will reciprocate.

Be calm.

Being calm is one of the greatest cues we can offer others that we are neither a threat or a pushover. Calm people convey authority, command and trust. Leaking high levels of emotions to students encourages them to do the same. Being calm suggests they should do likewise. And simply telling someone else to calm down is one of the least effective strategies we can imagine for someone who is upset, angry, stressed or agitated.

Tell them you care and *show* them you care.

In institutions it is easy to convey institutional expectations. But it is also important to convey human ones too. Students are both rational and emotional beings. We crave acceptance, being valued, and feeling safe. It is important for all students to understand that the space they are in with you is one that will provide them with these valuable goods. Use language that conveys sympathy with their situation (without necessarily agreeing with their issues) and at all times try to show consideration for their needs.

Note that this will, at times, mean aiming for their real needs rather than their perceived needs – in other words you may have to do for them what you know is best rather than what they think is best for them. Some students will rarely experience warmth or kindness. Even though colleges are organisations, they are also communities.

Body language and tone

Body language and tone is as important as what we say. Much of what we communicate is conveyed by non-verbal cues: body language, tone, volume and so on. Like verbal language, none of these cues has one single, simple meaning. A loud voice can communicate anger, imminent violence, or be aimed at cutting through a noisy corridor. So, for each situation, consider:

Posture and stance

Facing someone and maintaining eye contact is normally a powerful message to indicate focus. Similarly, facing away can often communicate lack of regard for them. Ask yourself ‘what is my body saying to this person?’.

Speed of speech

Talking quickly can convey nervousness, or a desire to finish the conversation quickly. Similarly, it can lead to confusion and missed meaning if the listener misses important points. Speak slowly and pause after each important point in order to assist understanding and take up.

Questions versus instructions

Avoid pointless conversations in circumstances where students are drawn in when they should be directed out. For example, when meeting a student who is smoking inside the building, asking them ‘What are you doing?’ is an opening gambit with no clear exit strategy. Saying directly ‘I need you to put that out immediately,’ is more useful.

Tone

The aim for most dialogues should be a midpoint between aggressiveness (which conveys no regard for other people) and dismissiveness (which conveys that *your* message is unimportant). The midpoint is **assertiveness**. An assertive tone isn’t angry or pleading; it is as clear and confident, as if one were asking for someone to pass the salt, without fear of rejection or the need to over-dominate.

Repetition of instruction

If a student fails to respond to your request, repeat it and ask them if they understand what is expected of them. Never simply drop the request if the response is non-compliance.

Always follow up

If a student fails to respond to a reasonable instruction – and no amount of repetition or nagging convinces them otherwise – it can feel dispiriting. Being ignored is sometimes more upsetting or disturbing than mild defiance.

The secret weapon in your arsenal is following up, for example, reporting to a line manager, contacting a parent, speaking to the student at the end of the day with a colleague present. This is a highly effective strategy because it conveys that you won't be ignored, and your instructions have consequences. Enlist other agencies in the school, especially high-status colleagues. Institutional and pastoral mentors are particularly effective allies.

Many colleges are uneasy or unwilling to use punitive responses to students who misbehave. But it is important that something happens to students who misbehave with you: if they misbehave, then consequence occurs. If there are no consequences, then the institution conveys the message that the students' actions don't matter, or that their misbehaviour is tacitly condoned. Neither is helpful for any party. The institution should encourage whole-community social norms, and one way in which you can encourage and support this principle is by demanding that the institution follows up all misbehaviour with some kind of response. If at all possible, ask to be involved in the institution's conversation with the student after any misbehaviour – let them understand that you too are a representative of the institution. When we stand alone, we make ourselves powerless. Together we stand much more of a chance.

Responding to challenging behaviour

Regardless of how positive, sincere, kind and assertive we are, there is no way to avoid the fact that we frequently have to react to negative behaviour. Anyone dealing with large numbers of students will routinely encounter misbehaviour that ranges from irritating to threatening. How is it best to respond to challenging behaviour? There are various strategies available to us depending on the circumstances:

Always lean on the team

You work in an institution, and you are not expected to handle and fix every problem alone. If a situation becomes too much to handle alone, it is always wise to summon help before it becomes essential. If students are persistently challenging, or very challenging even once, it must be recorded and reported. Ask for line manager help, not as a last resort but early on as a matter of good practice.

Record it

Memories are never as good as we would hope, and details fade quickly. It is essential for all follow-up that behaviour incidents are recorded either informally or formally, depending on the circumstances.

Stay calm and assess the situation before responding

Even a few seconds to reflect upon the best course of action is usually best. Unless the situation is immediately unstable (for example, a student is at risk of extreme harm or about to break the law) then pause and take a breath. Before responding to an angry comment, ask yourself what is the aim of your response? Is it to lash out in retaliation, or is it to solve the situation? Even in an emergency a few seconds thought can make the difference between good decisions and a hasty one.

Remember you aren't helpless

All institutions should have a behaviour code or policy that outlines good, expected and prohibited conduct, with accompanying consequences (sanctions, penalties, responses) for each category. It is best that all staff are aware of this and stick to this code as closely as possible. Consistency of approach is essential in an institution; while it may seem tempting to break the policy when it seems more useful to do

so, this strategy ultimately undermines the whole institution's approach by making it inconsistent from the student's perspective.

For consequences, remember the maxim: certainty is far more important than severity. There is a diminishing return with the severity of a sanction, but what really matters is that students know that action **X** will *always* be followed by consequence **Y**. They learn quickly that misbehaviour will not be tolerated, and oddly, that their actions matter and therefore so do they.

Never tolerate rudeness

Never tolerate rudeness or being treated with anything less than dignity. Your jobs are hard enough without being undermined as human beings. It might seem easier to ignore a slight, laugh it off or pretend it didn't happen. But this makes several things more likely: that they will repeat the action; that they will escalate the action, and that they will repeat the action with other members of staff.

Remember: what you permit, you promote. If you ignore a sexist or racist remark or attempt to engage such remarks with humour instead of a serious response, you create a circumstance where other colleagues are more likely to experience the same.

The college is a resource to support you

Asking for help is a right not a privilege. There is an institutional requirement to provide a safe working environment, adequate training and effective supervision for all staff. Asking for help is the positive choice, not the last resort.

Good institutions encourage this approach and use it as a tool to promote whole institution community engagement and staff support. Bad institutions treat asking for help as a nuisance, or a sign of weakness. Such reactions are a sure sign that the institution is improperly run or fails to grasp its duty towards its staff as well as its students.

If an institution fails to provide a supportive line management system, if your concerns are not being addressed, or worst of all, if you raise issues around safety and they are not addressed, consult your UNISON representative as soon as possible. It may be that they can help to resolve your impasse, liaise with the college on your behalf, or if necessary, help you to take action of a more formal nature.

You have a contract with the institution, and they with you. They can expect you to carry out your job role, and you can expect them to carry out theirs.

What if behaviour becomes extreme?

Sadly, we sometimes encounter extreme threatening, abusive behaviour or violence and harassment – or witness similar actions towards others. Arson, assault and the threat of harm are a sad part of the fabric of some jobs. It is important that we consider our strategies to deal with these extreme circumstances.

We need to remember that we are only expected to intervene in such circumstances where we feel safe to do so. Unless the job specifically and contractually requires it (for example the use of safe holds or structured use of permitted force), most staff members are within their rights to avoid taking action that places them in harm's way, and are legally protected from the need to do so.

That said, there may be some circumstances where direct and assertive action is required. If this is physical (for example, trying to break up a fight where it is reasonably safe to do so) the maxim should always be 'minimum and reasonable force for the minimum amount of time required to resolve the situation'. *Always* summon assistance if force is used or required and – unless time pressure doesn't permit – always attempt other non-physical strategies before using force.

Remember:

- In situations where emotions run high, it is doubly important to use clear, direct and instructive language. The middle of a fight, or when dealing with a violently agitated student, is not the time for questions requiring subtle answers.
- Take the emotion out of the situation. Try to encourage the student to leave the scene of any incident to a safe, calm, quiet place, where their emotions can settle.
- Separate antagonists. Removing the cause of upset frequently neutralises the need for them to feel aggressive or violent.
- Use a calm, assertive tone. Aggression often breeds aggression.
- Remove the audience. People act very differently when being observed – especially by peers.

Looking after yourself and others

Dealing with others is exhausting. When we have to manage the behaviour of others it is important to remember that we are part of the equation, and that our well-being can easily be affected by doing so. Of course, the majority of interactions with students and other staff members should be pleasant, instructive or neutral. In such circumstances, our interactions can be rewarding and refreshing. Other times it can be wearing. The simple act of trying to get someone else to co-operate is draining, especially if the level of non-compliance is high. Worse, abuse or incivility can cause our emotional reserves to dwindle or leave us feeling bruised.

If you are struggling to manage the demands that these circumstances place on your well-being, it is vital that you record it and tell a line manager – and have a conversation about what you can both do. They may be able to help, suggest a restorative strategy, or devise a plan aimed at your support. It is vital that staff don't bottle up their anxieties; while all staff are expected to withstand reasonable levels of stress or hardship, problems shared often halve or dissipate.

Stressful encounters raise our adrenaline levels. This is a physical response which typically cannot be switched off at will. It takes up to 45 minutes for our bodies to adjust to normal after an event that makes us upset, angry or emotional. Be aware of where you are in that cycle; avoid further stressful situations if possible until the end of that cycle and avoid circumstances where you will be forced to make important decisions during that time.

Remember to:

- ✓ Make good use of breaks, long or short
- ✓ Exercise to relieve stress
- ✓ Do things that make you happy, unrelated to work
- ✓ Get adequate rest and sleep to recuperate from stress.

Stress-related illnesses are one of the most common reasons to get signed off work for – and dealing with people is one of the most stressful things we can do.

Working in further education can be a rewarding and

positive experience for everyone. If we remember some of these straightforward principles, we can all work together in a friendly, efficient and professional way.

How UNISON can help you

UNISON has a network of trained and supportive representatives who help members when they face problems at work. You may have a representative in your college or you may need to contact your local branch to speak to rep.

The majority of workplace problems are resolved informally, but occasionally they are best resolved through a more formal process. Your UNISON rep will be able to advise you on the best course of action.

Talk to your rep

UNISON members can call UNISON Direct on 0800 0 857 857, who will help you get in contact with your local branch. A rep can help you by listening to you talk through the problem at work and, if necessary, advise you on how get the problem resolved and support you through this process.

Keep notes

Remember, it is always a good idea to keep a written record of the problem that you need help with. This will help you and your rep decide on the best course of action.

Work together

If there are several staff dealing with the same problem, then work together to try and resolve the problem. If you are all UNISON members, then consider if a collective approach would be best to deliver a good outcome for all concerned.

Resources for UNISON members

UNISON provides guides that can help, including on:

- Stress at work
- Violence at work
- Part-time and term-time workers' guidance
- Dealing with discrimination and harassment at work

You can find all of this and more at:

www.unison.org.uk/get-help/knowledge or on the UNISON online catalogue:

www.unison.org.uk/catalogue

There for you

'There for You', UNISON's own charity, provides a range of support to members including debt advice and financial support for those facing difficulties.

Training

UNISON provides a range of free training courses. You can find out all about our courses which include online learning modules on dyslexia awareness and administration of medicines, as well as courses to help you develop confidence, or learn about autism awareness, behaviour management, mental health awareness by going online at <https://learning.unison.org.uk/>

UNISON also organises a range of conferences and seminars each year, for example, a seminar for college staff, college staff governor seminar, women's conference, health and safety seminar and many more. See unison.org.uk/events to find out what's coming up.

If you would like to become a workplace steward or health and safety representative we'll provide you with free training and make sure you get paid time off work. Get in touch with your branch to find out more.

UNISON represents all support staff in colleges and further education institutions, as well as in schools and universities and other education institutions.

Not in UNISON?

Join today at joinunison.org or call
0800 171 2193 or ask your UNISON rep
for an application form.

