**4-6-22 Steps to Discussing Challenging Behavior With a Student**

**RESTORATIVE PRACTICES**

4 Steps to Discussing Challenging Behavior With a Student

Addressing students’ behavior can be tough, but it’s possible to approach them in ways that show compassion and help them feel ready to discuss the issue.

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We’ve read about and witnessed firsthand the mental health crisis and increase in [behavioral challenges](https://www.wsj.com/story/after-months-of-disrupted-learning-student-misbehavior-is-on-the-rise-fbc17fea) of students this year. Because of those challenges, which are coupled with a lack of [mental health providers in schools](https://salud-america.org/47-states-dont-meet-the-recommended-student-to-counselor-ratio/), educators often find themselves in a position of having difficult conversations with students around social, emotional, and behavioral struggles. As many teachers report an increase in stress, responding to challenging behaviors and student emotional needs can leave us feeling exhausted.

The four simple steps that follow can assist you when having difficult conversations with students. They can be used as part of a process after a student has escalated, when a student shares about a struggle, or when you are trying to interact with a disengaged student.

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**1. START BY CHECKING IN**

Check the situation: Before you enter a conversation, it’s important to first determine if the situation warrants a conversation or requires a behavioral intervention. Ask yourself, “Is this a crisis?” If the student is engaging in behaviors that are unsafe toward themselves or others, attend to the safety issue first, and then once the crisis is over and the student is de-escalated, you can prepare for a conversation.

Check yourself: Before you enter any conversation, do a quick check-in with yourself to see how you’re doing and if you’re ready and able to engage in a difficult conversation. These are questions to ask yourself: What am I feeling? Am I my best self? Am I calm? Can I think clearly and rationally? If you find yourself feeling anxious, frustrated, or not your best self, take a few minutes to settle your own emotions. There are many great [mindfulness exercises](https://www.happify.com/hd/8-mindfulness-exercises-that-will-calm-you-down-instantly/) that will quickly help you settle your own emotions and help ground you. Remember, you put on your own oxygen mask first before you can help anyone else.

Check the student*:*Take a few seconds to look at the student and observe their body language, eye contact, and behaviors. See if you can quickly determine any information about whether it’s a good time to approach the student by carefully observing their appearance and actions. Perhaps the student is looking disheveled as if they have not showered recently, or they seem tired or hungry. These may be signs that the student’s basic needs must be addressed and could also be impacting their behavior.

Check the environment: Make sure that you and the student are in a safe and confidential place before engaging in a conversation.

**2. CONVERSE TO UNDERSTAND THE STUDENT’S NEEDS**

Once you’ve completed your checks and come to the conclusion that you’re emotionally ready to have a conversation, the student is willing and able to talk, and the setting is conducive to chatting, then you can start the conversation. Using [restorative practices](https://www.edutopia.org/article/proactive-approach-discipline) in the conversation helps you focus on supporting the student.

Engage the student: The first part of any effective conversation involves engaging the student. This can be done through a regular greeting like “Hey” or asking an opening question like “How are you doing?” As you start engaging the student, it’s important to focus on the issue at hand. State the facts without any emotions or feeling statements, making comments such as “I have noticed you’ve been showing up late” or “You seem really tired and have been sleeping in class.” If the student doesn’t immediately respond to the facts, it’s helpful to normalize struggles through compassionate statements such as “It’s a hard time for a lot of people right now” or “I know a lot of people are really struggling with... now.”

Explore what’s going on: Take some time to explore what’s going on in the student’s life. You can do this by asking open-ended questions to elicit more information, focusing on details such as who, what, when, where, and how. When you find yourself stuck on not knowing what to say next, you can always ask, “Can you tell me more about that?”

Validate, don’t fix: When a student starts talking, it’s important to provide validation through comments such as “That sounds really rough” or “I think a lot of people would feel the same way in that situation. It makes perfect sense that you felt that way.”​ Validation shows that you care about the student. Remember, it’s not your job to fix everything. Watch this short video, [*It’s Not About the Nail*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4EDhdAHrOg), for a humorous look at the difference between validating someone and trying to fix the problem.

Confirm your understanding: To ensure that the student feels heard and to make sure you have an accurate understanding of the situation, it’s helpful to ask clarifying questions like “When you said..., what did you mean?”​ Paraphrasing or summarizing involves retelling what the student shared and voicing statements such as “It seems like you have a lot going on. You talked about...”​ and “In my understanding, the main challenges here are...” It’s helpful to ask, “Was there anything else that I missed?”

**3. MAKE A SINCERE CONNECTION**

Connect with the student: To let the student know you care, you can say things like “I’m here for you” and “You have a lot of people, including me, who care about you.”

Connect potential solutions: To let your student know that they’re not alone, use “we” instead of “you” statements, as in “What can we do to make this better?” Instead of simply offering advice, ask the student questions like “What are some options of what could be done?” or “What do you need right now?” If the student is having trouble thinking of ways to help the situation, you can ask, “If your friend had this challenge, what would you say to them?”

Connect to resources: This is the important part of the conversation, where you help direct the student to supportive resources and coping strategies. Through asking questions like “What can you do the next time you’re struggling?” “Who else can you talk with about this?” or “What or who can make this better?” you can guide students in exploring and identifying their support systems.

**4. END ON A POSITIVE NOTE**

Thank the student for sharing​: To wrap up the conversation and reinforce that you care about the student, it’s important to thank them with phrases such as “Thank you for talking with me today” or “I appreciate you opening up and sharing with me.” It’s helpful to think of difficult conversations as a gift and an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with the student.

After conversation, plan to follow up​. Serious conversations aren’t simply a onetime thing but are opportunities to continue the topic at later times. To conclude the conversation, you can end it with a statement such as “I want to check in later. Let’s plan to talk more tomorrow” or “Next week, I’ll follow up with you to see how you’re doing with this.”