10 Interventions When Students Get Out of Hand

Using active learning techniques tends to minimize the classroom management problems that often plague teachers who rely too heavily on lecture and full-group discussion. If difficulties such as monopolizing, distracting, and withdrawing behaviors still occur here are some interventions you can use. Some work well with individual students, others work with the entire class.

1. **Signal non-verbally.** Make eye contact with students or move closer to them when they hold private conversations, start to fall asleep, or hide from participation. Make a “T” sign with your fingers to stop unwanted behavior. If a student talks too much, stand beside him/her and face the other students, gently cutting the student off.

2. **Listen actively.** When students monopolize discussion, go off on a tangent, or argue with you, interject with a summary of their views and then ask others to speak. Or you can acknowledge the value of their viewpoints or invite them to discuss their views with you during a break.

3. **Get your ducks in a row.** When the same students always speak up in class while others hold back, pose a question or problem and then ask how many people have a response to it. You might see new hands go up—call on one of them. The same technique is useful when trying to obtain volunteers for role-playing.

4. **Invoke participation rules.** You can set a list of ground rules so that students understand what you expect of them in class. If you allow students to help you construct the guidelines, they may be more willing to apply them. Some examples of ground rules include:
   a. Only students who have not spoken as yet can participate.
   b. Build on each other’s ideas.
   c. Speak for yourself, not for others.

5. **Use good-natured humor.** One way to deflect difficult behavior is to use humor with students. Be careful, however, not to be sarcastic or patronizing. Gently protest the harassment (e.g., “Enough, enough for one day!”). Humorously, put yourself down instead of the students (e.g., “I guess I deserved this.”)

6. **Connect on a personal level.** Whether the problem is that students are hostile or withdrawn, make a point of getting to know them during breaks. It’s less likely that students will continue to give you a hard time or remain distant if you have taken an interest in them. Sometimes attention is the very thing they want.

7. **Change the method of participation.** Sometimes you can minimalize a difficult student’s damage done by inserting new formats such as using pairs or small groups rather than full-class activities.
8. **Take appropriate action with mildly negative behaviors.** You may decide to pay little or no attention to behaviors that are small nuisances, and choose to carry on with the class to see if they go away. Certainly, you don’t want to come across as constantly policing your students. On the other hand, such behavior may be a well-intentioned cue that you need to do something different. Robert Boice, in *First-Order Principles for College Teachers: Ten Basic Ways to Improve the Teaching Process*, suggests you respond quickly when you receive clues that students are unhappy. If Bob in row five emits a loud “ugh,” for example, the teacher can say something light, “I guess I’m wearing you out with all of this. Would it help if I summarized?”

9. **Discuss very negative behaviors in private.** You must call a stop to behaviors you find detrimental to learning. Firmly request, in private, a change in behavior from those students who are disruptive. If the entire class is involved, stop the lesson and explain clearly what you need from students to conduct the class effectively.

10. **Don’t take personally the difficulties you encounter.** Remember that many problem behaviors have nothing to do with you. They are due to personal fears and needs or displaced anger toward someone else. See if you can pick up cues when this is the case and ask whether students can put aside the conditions affecting their positive involvement in the class.