



## FREE REPORT

By classroom behaviour coach - Andy Vass - [www.andyvass.net](http://www.andyvass.net)

# The 7 most common mistakes in classroom management - and how to avoid them!

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When I started my probationary year back in 1975, I wasn't overly concerned about teaching my subject well. I knew I could do that. But I was worried about how well my classes would behave!

The big question for me was:

*'Would there be an 'orderly and calm learning environment' or 'unruly chaos'?*

Today, I know from training literally thousands of teachers, including my three children, this is still the no.1 anxiety for most new teachers (and a few more experienced ones too!).

That's why I've put together this Free Report full of tips and strategies to help you manage in the classroom.

If you feel I've left anything out, want to ask me any questions or have tips of your own to share - please email me at [andy@andyvass.net](mailto:andy@andyvass.net).

# Introduction

As you may know, I run coaching workshops for teachers - you may have been on one yourself.

If so, you'll know that many people say on their feedback forms:

**"Andy, these are great ideas - but I wish I'd known about them before I started teaching!"**

Obviously you can't learn everything before you start so I got to think that maybe a really useful place to start was to avoid some "mistakes" that seemed common across primary and secondary teachers and in different countries too.

Also many new teachers are telling me that their colleges and PGCE programmes simply get you to read a few books and then learn stuff on your teaching practices. Equally unsurprisingly, many of you feel you enter the classroom unprepared for the challenges ahead.

Although learning on the job is valuable you wouldn't want your dentist or surgeon to be left to their own devices to the same degree that teachers are!

To be a highly effective teacher does take some time.

*It requires mistakes to be made and learned from.*

*It needs exposure to already gifted teachers and the opportunity to pick their brains and find ways of integrating successful ideas into your own practice.*

But what helps this process is starting with a clear understanding of the key attitudes that highly effective practitioners unconsciously demonstrate.

In this report I'm highlighting the seven most common mistakes that make the task of building a positive and emotionally literate learning environment much harder.

You'll also be relieved to note that I suggest what you could do instead of making these mistakes!

# Mistake #1

## Don't smile until Christmas!

Imagine starting a teaching job and finding that for the first few weeks none of your colleagues smiled at you or showed any kind of warmth and humanity!

**Amazingly, over 83% of teachers have heard or been exposed to this advice.**

It was given to me in 1975. It was unhelpful then but now it is not only ridiculous and inappropriate but potentially damaging. I have met many teachers who have mistakenly attempted to put this into practice even though it was completely alien to their character and personality.

Some teachers will also claim that it is important to keep a distance between you and the children and "show them who is boss"

### **TRY THIS INSTEAD**

It *is* important to establish boundaries with children of all ages. A large part of your job is to clearly explain what kinds of behaviour are acceptable and what kinds are unacceptable. As an adult and a professional it is your right to set this agenda so that a focus on learning is possible; children can feel safe physically and psychologically; and everyone is treated in a dignified and respectful way.

The key is to not confuse being assertive and very clear in what your standards and expectations are with being cold and miserable or worse – hostile and dictatorial.

As for "showing them who is boss", let's not confuse being a professional and an adult with being aloof or demonstrating an air of superiority.

**There's no rule that says someone who sets the agenda and is in charge cannot be natural, warm and humane**

For this process to be effective you need to model what it is that you want to be happening in your classroom. This involves building trust and rapport with children, being friendly and humane AND still holding them accountable if they choose to work outside the boundaries.

### Simple question

How does smiling and being a reasonable human being prevent you from saying "No" or even applying a sanction when it is needed? The answer is they don't. In fact, these two things mutually support each other.

### **LEARN MORE**

Check out the "4Rs" and "Tough care" in my Behaviour Management Pocketbook - available from [www.andyvass.net/shop.html](http://www.andyvass.net/shop.html)

# Mistake # 2

## Trying to control behaviour

What does it feel like when people try to control **you** and make demands on you?

**Probably not comfortable, right?**

We all have a “**resistance principle**” that instinctively tells us that when people say we **should** do something, it might not be in our best interests.

Children’s resistance principle is associated with a potential loss of face or removal of natural autonomy. It shows itself as behaviour which ranges from stropky and argumentative right through up to defiant.

It’s a bit of a no brainer isn’t it and yet it’s amazing how much the word “control” is used in teaching literature. Yet psychologists all agree that:

**The only behaviour you can control is your own!**

Check out your attitudes and beliefs about being a teacher.

If you believe it’s important that you **must** control children or hold the attitude that children **should** obey you and you also direct your energies towards these outcomes, it’s highly likely you’ll find that classroom interactions become more hostile. The result will be that you find yourself becoming increasingly demanding and relying heavily on punishment.

You’ll also find you develop a very narrow and **very unhealthy** perspective on your work – you’ll notice significantly more of the stuff that isn’t working yet!

BTW – it’s equally ineffective at the other end of the attitude spectrum when the teacher tries to be a “best friend” to children. This can lead to blurred boundaries, an over focus on the social agenda and some children feeling socially excluded.

### **TRY THIS INSTEAD**

Effective teacher beliefs/attitude tends to reflect that of “tough care.” This is characterised by:

- Clear and explicit boundaries
- Accountability when boundaries are crossed
- Repairing of the relationship after the accountability
- A strong focus on “catching children being good” i.e. the vast majority of the interactions are focused on what people do well rather than the mistakes they make.

## Highly effective teachers seek firstly to influence and then to manage children's behaviour.

To do this you'll need to focus on two areas – preventative practice and effective use of consequences

### Preventative practice

These include all the ideas and skills that when **proactively** implemented make it significantly less likely that children misbehave. I suggest that all teachers build lists of these skills.

Obvious things like building rapport or creating good relationships fall into this category but it is more useful to chunk it down into actual behaviours or actions that you can take. For example, smiling, saying good morning, being interested in their weekends or hobbies are all practical ways to build rapport

Remember preventative practice is applicable in almost all areas in which teachers and children come into contact including the curriculum and how you structure or organise your classroom and its routines.

### Consequences

Consequences are how we describe the outcome (normally teacher provided) that results from the child's choice of behaviour. The simple rule is that positive behaviours lead to rewarding and affirmative consequences whilst inappropriate behaviours lead to consequences designed to limit repetition of the undesirable behaviour usually called sanctions.

Remember:

- Develop clear rewards and sanctions and share them with the children
- Apply rewards and sanctions on a continuum from least to most intrusive
- Create certainty and inevitability around the process (consistency)
- When appropriate, discuss what the rewards and sanctions could be with the children

# Mistake # 3

## Taking poor behaviour personally

What happens when you imagine being in charge of a group of 30 (or maybe more) different agendas at the same time and being required to manage them into a calm and focused learning environment?

**It's hardly surprising it gets your nervous juices going at some level, is it?**

- Then add in the various expectations and targets you are supposed to attain.
- Include your natural desire to make a difference to your children and ...
- Add a healthy dose of professional pride.

What you probably recognise now are some of the things that contribute to why you get to feel under pressure in a classroom.

**The mistake you may sometimes make is to believe that when children misbehave or directly challenge you it is something personal.**

**Remember: It very rarely is - but if you handle it wrongly it sometimes becomes that way**

Testing boundaries and "getting the measure" of new teachers is **normal**.

Because it's almost impossible to disguise your thoughts and feelings, the children will pick up on your ideas and attitudes towards them and respond accordingly. The obvious example is that if they sense you don't like them they will respond in kind.

Similarly, if you react to children who misbehave as if they are impediments to you being able to deliver the curriculum i.e. unwelcome irritants, it creates a relational barrier which makes connecting and building rapport very difficult.

Children find ways of coping with school through their behaviour. The most effective teachers look to find solutions to behavioural issues in a professional and measured way as part of the challenge of the job. They also tend to be most comfortable talking to colleagues and seeking advice. It is no coincidence that really effective teachers have a sense of resilience which comes from good emotional self management, a sense of optimism that they will be a way forward (even though it may take time).

Resilience and well being is also enhanced by retaining perspective. By this I mean a healthy and predominant focus on what they do well and all the things that work for them. A surprising number of teachers even with lots of experience dwell more on the bits of the day that didn't work. This is not healthy nor as some would have us believe, reflective practice

## TRY THIS INSTEAD

A great question to ask is:

**“What could I remember to do next time something like this happens, so that it is more useful?”**

A more useful way of thinking about things is to remember the idea that:

**All behaviour is purposeful**

Purposeful in the sense that all our behaviours are attempts to:

- gain something (usually peer kudos or attention)
- not lose something (usually status or saving face in front of their friends)
- get our emotional needs met (attention, achievement, safety, autonomy etc)

A useful way of thinking about behaviour is to consider that not only is it a positive action on the part of the child but it was the best choice they had at the time.

Effective responses that help you to avoid taking it personally are:

- modelling the behaviour you want rather than reacting to the behaviour you’re getting. Remember who the adult is!
- looking to find solutions to behavioural issues in a professional and measured way as part of the challenge of the job. Talk to colleagues, be open about the challenges you face. Find colleagues that do it well and pick their brains.
- managing your emotions, and being optimistic that a way forward will be found in time. Building trust and strong relationships doesn’t happen overnight and you rarely build good relationships with people who you think don’t like you or who seem to find you tiresome
- keeping things in perspective; remember the things you do well and avoid over focusing on things that haven’t gone as well as you hoped.

**Remember - Children don't do things to you.  
They do things for themselves.**

# Mistake # 4

## Using negative or imprecise language

**Remember this - Language is never neutral.**

Everything you say to children triggers an emotional response in them. This often occurs at an unconscious level - i.e. we are unaware of it.

A common mistake in the classroom is to use mainly **negative language**

“Don’t talk when I’m speaking please”

“Stop calling out”

“Don’t push when you’re in the line”

A variation is to phrase instructions in a **potentially ambiguous style**

“I need to you to behave”

“Be nice when you’re working together”

“Nathan, pay attention and stop disturbing others”

Using the sort of language illustrated above does not offer a clear enough direction nor does it create possibility that the child will respond in the desired way.

### **TRY THIS INSTEAD**

The golden rules in effective and influential language use are:

- Tell children what you want them to do rather than what you want them to stop doing
- Be precise and specific in your descriptions

In this way the examples at the start could become **clearly managed**:

“I need/ expect you to listen in silence when I’m speaking. Thank you”

“Put your hand up first and wait your turn to answer a question. Thank you”

“Stand still in the line and keep your hands to yourself”

“I need you to look this way and listen to me carefully”

“Remember to ask before you borrow someone’s things”

“Nathan, I need you to put your pen down, look this way and listen. Thanks”

### **LEARN MORE:**

Check out more about classroom language in my book, **Teaching with Influence**: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Teaching-Influence-Peter-Hook/dp/1853466921>

# Mistake # 5

## Attending to secondary behaviours

Behaviour can be broadly differentiated between “primary” and “secondary” behaviours. These terms indicate the sequence of events rather than the age of the children. Primary behaviours are those behaviours which require us to respond and correct because they:

- intrude on the learning process
- infringe safety (physical or psychological)
- ignore respectful and dignified treatment of others

Secondary behaviours are those that sometimes follow when a child is corrected. over primary behaviour. Secondary behaviour has two categories:

- non verbal
- verbal

Non verbal secondary behaviours are when the child adopts particular body language when you correct them. Examples are:

- pulling a face
- sulking
- sighing or tutting etc

Verbal secondary behaviours are often called “the last word syndrome” and involve some direct riposte/response from the child to “defend” their position. Examples are:

“I was only.....”

“He’s doing it too”

“No body else minds when we.....”

These are seldom said in a pleasant respectful tone of voice!!!

The common mistake is to get diverted or sidetracked into attending to the secondary behaviour and making it your focus. When you do this you:

- lose the agenda of what you were trying to achieve
- increase emotional arousal levels
- become vulnerable to pointless arguments
- increase “audience participation”

### **TRY THIS INSTEAD**

**The key principle here is - Maintain your focus on primary behaviours**

Virtually all secondary behaviours are an attempt by the child to save face by diverting attention away from the poor choice they made about their behaviour.

Recognising this and minimising the attention you give to secondary behaviours makes it more likely they just peter out.

It is possible (and highly effective) to learn to ignore non verbal secondary behaviours. They usually stop quite quickly if you pay no attention to them.

Another option is to physically move the conversation to a different place. Literally just a few steps away makes all the difference. Giving a logical reason also helps:

*“Let’s move away from the door because people need to get through”*

*“It’s better if we talk quietly over here isn’t it?”*

Because we all have an instinctive or default pattern of how to walk, this takes precedence and the “strop” body language is likely to stop.

When faced with verbal secondary behaviours it’s **really** important to keep your mind on your outcome. You’ll want to achieve the following:

- deflating any tension or potential conflict
- ignoring the tone of voice (its a non verbal behaviour)
- getting the child back on track as quickly as possible

**Use a “maybe .... and” pattern; Here’s how it sounds:**

Child: *“I was only asking what page we were on”*

You: *“Maybe you were and I still need you to listen now. Thanks”*

Child: *“Mrs Smith lets us sit with our friends”*

You: *“Maybe she does and in this class we have a seating plan to help us learn. Choose to sit here. Thanks”*

Here’s **why** it works:

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Step 1 | Quite simply you are agreeing with the child and their ‘defence’. You are letting them know that you understand their point of view. |
| Step 2 | You have created some agreement between you.   |
| Step 3 | If there’s agreement, there can’t be tension or conflict.  |
| Step 4 | You use the word <b>“and”</b> to link to the next step   |
| Step 5 | You redirect them to the outcome you want  |

## LEARN MORE

Check out this and loads more patterns and ideas in my **Behaviour Management Pocketbook** - available from [www.andyvass.net/shop.html](http://www.andyvass.net/shop.html)

## Mistake # 6

# Criticising the person rather than the behaviour

We all know that learning involves taking a risk and doing things that are new or approaching ideas differently.

It follows then that making mistakes is an *essential* element of the learning process.

There's an old adage that says no-one learned anything by getting everything right

You're probably more comfortable with this idea when applied to children's academic progress. You encourage them to try things and have probably heard yourself saying something along the lines of:

**"It doesn't matter if you don't get it correct first time. It's how we all learn"**

But maybe you are less comfortable with the idea when it comes to children's behaviour!

In reality there's no difference. You may have set really clear boundaries of what's acceptable behaviour with your class and that's important.

**Children will need to break through those boundaries as a normal and natural process of development.**

They do this to test to see if you mean what you say. To see if you will be the caring adult who will create a safe environment and provide the consistency that enables them to know where they stand.

We also know that strong relationships are built on trust. The question that children want to know the answer to is:

**"Will this adult help me do the right things AND leave me feeling OK about myself?"**

A common mistake is to use language unwittingly that connects the identity or personality of the child with the undesirable behaviour.

"Come on now stop being silly"

"Michael, you're rude and disruptive"

"Simone, I'm disappointed in you"

"Jenny, don't be so spiteful"

Even something as common as looking at a child and just saying their name in a disapproving tone of voice has the same effect.

### **TRY THIS INSTEAD**

Effective teachers will separate out the inappropriate behaviour from the child. They express disapproval of the *act* or *behaviour* **never** the person. It requires you to consider your language patterns and it's possible to develop the habit of using more effective language patterns.

“Come on now, making those noises is not appropriate”

“Michael, when you say that to Luke it shows a lack of respect”

“Simone, I was disappointed that you didn't finish your work today”

“Jenny, calling people names is hurtful”

Another **very** powerful way of keeping the behaviour separate from the person is to use the language of choice.

If you “frame” undesirable behaviour as a poor choice that the child has made then by implication it is not part of who they are. Equally, it means that next time they can make a better or more appropriate one.

Examples of this may be:

“Darren, you're out of your seat. Make a better choice and get back on task now. Thanks”

“Rifat, did you make good choices at circle time?”

“Ellie, It's OK to be angry but I need you to choose to stay respectful when you talk to me”

### **LEARN MORE**

Check out how to improve the emotional climate of your classroom with my book, **Creating Winning Classrooms** - available at <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Creating-Winning-Classrooms-Peter-Hook/dp/1853466913>

# Mistake # 7

## Adopting a negative outlook about your performance

Simple question.

**"Do you go home at the end of the day and think more about the parts of the day that didn't work as well as you'd hoped for than you do of the parts that did?"**

If you fit with the trend I notice in the vast majority of new teachers you're probably be nodding right now aren't you?

And when you do this does it make you feel good? Empowered? Optimistic?

"No?"

Then stop doing it!!!!!!

### **Focusing on what didn't work is the worst way of improving**

I don't mean that you shouldn't reflect on your day and evaluate things **but** there's a more valuable way of thinking about things that will enable you to:

- Build a sense of resilience
- Create optimism and possibility
- Expand your skill set
- Successfully change your behaviour to improve your effectiveness
- Sustain those positive changes

Think about it this way. Can you imagine high performers in any discipline – sport, business, theatre, medicine – having a major focus on what they do wrong?

Can you imagine Usain Bolt standing at the start line in the Olympic final dwelling on all the times he's run badly, all the niggling injuries he's had recently, looking down the line and thinking how good the other runners are and when they beat him last?

Its crazy isn't it? And yet teachers often put themselves through the same process during what they call reflective practice.

### **TRY THIS INSTEAD**

- High performing individuals will always have a more significant focus on aspects of their performance that are successful. Not in a boastful or

delusional way but part of creating a productive and positive psychological state

- To be reflective you must be calm. Put emotional distance between you and the school day. Think happy thoughts, take some exercise, play with pets, your kids etc.
- Recognise that whatever has happened is over and it will NEVER occur in exactly the same way again.
- Remember that you can only control **your** behaviour and when you think of events that didn't work well ask yourself "what **didn't** I do?" Imagine the benefit of an "action replay". See the event on an imaginary screen (this removes strong emotion) and run it through again this time editing your actions, behaviours or speech so that it is more effective. When you are happy with this, run it through several more times paying attention to what it feels like to be more successful/ calmer more professional etc.

**In doing things this way you are achieving the following:**

- Thinking of actual behaviours or language patterns that are potentially more successful
- Actually rehearsing new patterns of behaviour. Because the brain is a pattern matching organ, if something similar happens again you will **already** have a new way of responding which will be more useful to you
- Confirming that you are creative and can generate alternative and more empowering outcomes
- Boosting your self esteem and feeling more optimistic about future interactions with children.

**THINK ABOUT:**

**Start keeping a "Victory Log".**

This is a small notebook (electronic if you prefer) in which you regularly note down events and interactions that please you. The definition of 'pleasing you' is:

**"If this happened some more, I'd welcome it"**

Loads of teachers do this. The idea of physically noting things down is part of a process of building a more positive orientation. After a while you may find you do this naturally as a habit in your head. But it's OK to keep the victory log going if you prefer.

A good time to flick through it is when you're feeling a bit deflated or tired. Skimming through the evidence of your success is a real morale booster

## Learn more

If you are motivated and truly committed to becoming the best teacher you can be, then my behaviour management courses and other resources can help you succeed.

I'm not going to tell you that I offer powerful and hugely successful ideas, tried and tested by thousands of teachers - you can decide that for yourself.



Find out about all my resources at:  
[www.andyvass.net](http://www.andyvass.net)

### Here's what TES have said ...

*"... Andy is the foremost trainer in the UK on behaviour"*

*"... An outstanding resource – impressive"*

*"... A cut above simple tips – he seeks to help teachers become more inspirational"*

*"... Andy challenges conventional thinking – few books are as good"*

**amazon.co.uk**

My co-authored books are available online from [amazon](http://amazon)

- **Confident Classroom Leadership**, by Peter Hook & Andy Vass
- **Creating Winning Classrooms**, by Peter Hook & Andy Vass
- **Teaching with influence**, by Peter Hook & Andy Vass