A classroom that is managed by emotional responses from the teacher is an unpredictable and often frightening place in which to learn. When I was at school, Mr ‘Chopper’ Harris used to throw a board rubber indiscriminately. I was always more worried about getting one full in the face than I was about maths. In the 21st century the threat of the unpredictable teacher still exists, albeit with less violence, and has a similar effect.

From the moment you enter the classroom you are being read. The children are drawing information from your physical and verbal language. Some want to read your mood, others to see how assertive you are, a few decide there and then if they can get away with breaking the rules. They are watching for your reactions and testing when emotion will take the place of reason. If you display your ‘emotional buttons’ don’t be surprised when they are pressed.

Some teachers display their buttons, others advertise them: ‘If you do that again I am going to get very angry’ or ‘I am going to scream if anyone else asks to go to the toilet’. Passing control of your responses to group of six year olds is, in all probability, going to end in tears - not always theirs. The inconsistency leads to broken trust and there is no certainty in the relationship between teacher and pupil. Unfair and
unpredictable teachers have a hard time managing their own behaviour, building trust and managing the behaviour of their pupils.

**Natural reactions**

When you shout at children (or any human being) you encourage their reflex action: ‘fight’ or ‘flight’. Their emotional brain is sending blood rushing to the heart and legs and hands. As the body prepares for action and emotion takes over, the rational mind that is needed for higher order thought is blocked. That is why shouting ‘Answer the question!’ rarely gets a positive or intelligent response. It is also why that speeding ticket that you got on the way into work is making you react inconsistently with the first child who frustrates you. How you are feeling can begin to affect the way in which you teach. How students feel affects the way in which they learn. Emotionally secure classrooms where mutual trust is nurtured allow children to take risks, accept responsibility for their learning and grow in confidence. The teachers are not devoid of emotion, but save emotional outbursts for a less impressionable audience.

Working with young children everyday alters your perception of them. This can play havoc with your emotions. It is this disorientation that allows a Year 1 teacher to start believing that at Year 5 are threatening, best avoided, dangerous even. The same altered state that, unchecked, results in colleagues ‘giving up’ on 11 year old children and labelling them as ‘unteachable’. We have all had the same experience of reacting with sharp emotion that is inappropriate for the age of the recipient. Cue tears, heartfelt look, letter from parents etc. In classes where the teacher’s raw emotion makes a regular appearance the children either learn to ignore it or are worried by it; neither offers benefits for managing behaviour. It is far too easy to react to the behaviour of children inappropriately and set a poor model for behaviour. Modelling appropriate behaviour for pupils is an essential part of your role and provides a useful focus for managing your own emotions. Model the behaviour you want to see in your pupils and your own behaviour will also change.

**Controlling your Responses**

Controlling your emotions and behaviour does not mean removing your soul and becoming an automaton. There are practical strategies you can adopt to control your emotions and model appropriate responses:

- **Verbalise the behaviour that you want/expect/need to see.** Don’t expect children to know how you want them to behave.
- **Exercise your empathy frequently and vigorously:** remind yourself that the world from behind the eyes of a five year old is a very different place.
- **Find space for private conversations,** get down to eye level, preferably lower (unless that means lying down!). Deal with as much as possible as discretely as possible.
- **Create a ritual for withdrawing from conversation when your frustration takes over.** Plan a graceful and assertive way back, ‘When I walked away from our discussion about the mess on your table I did so because I was feeling cross. I gave myself time think and work out what to say to you. We now need to have a polite conversation and find a solution to the problem’.
- **When you intervene, attack the behaviour and not the child** – ‘You have chosen to eat sand again Sean, that is a poor choice’ rather than ‘Sean, you naughty boy, you are always etc...’
- **Talk to your class about how you calm yourself down when you feel angry/frustrated/lonely.** Map ways that you control emotion on the wall.

**Look who’s talking**

Modelling behaviour does not mean hiding your cigarettes, turning off your gangsta rap as you drive into the car park or pretending that you live in the school. Modelling appropriate behaviour is harder work, takes time to have the desired effect and requires you to scrutinise your own behaviour rigorously.

You are the primary role model for behaviour in a learning environment. For many children you are the only useful role model for acceptable behaviour. With more challenging children, your emotional control and the behaviour you demonstrate needs to be more obvious, pointed even. Children with chaotic home lives may only see appropriate adult behaviour at school. To compete, your behaviour must be overt, talked through, ritualised even. For other children your modelling can be subtle: the control not to laugh at Samuel’s answer, the willingness to laugh at your own, the patience to allow Sharon to walk out and the control to keep your pointy finger at bay. You model how to ignore the fact that Daniel has wet himself and how to praise Constantine so it makes him beam with pride. Modelling appropriate behaviour has a direct effect on the standards of behaviour, quality of learning and the way in which the children interact.

Behaviour Management starts with the adults. When we are in control of our own response to children’s behaviour the next steps on the journey are so much easier for everyone.

**Taking Care of Behaviour**

Paul Dix is the lead trainer for Pivotal Education, a consultancy company that specialises in teacher training, with an emphasis on managing classroom behaviour. He is also the author of two books, Pivotal Behaviour Management Handbook and the just released Taking Care of Behaviour. Designed as self-training manuals, they can help teachers to build confidence in their own capabilities and understand why their own behaviour is so important. Pivotal Education can organise INSET days, run regular courses and run an E-mentoring scheme.

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