

# TAKE CONTROL of the **NOISY** CLASS

From CHAOS to Calm in 15 Seconds

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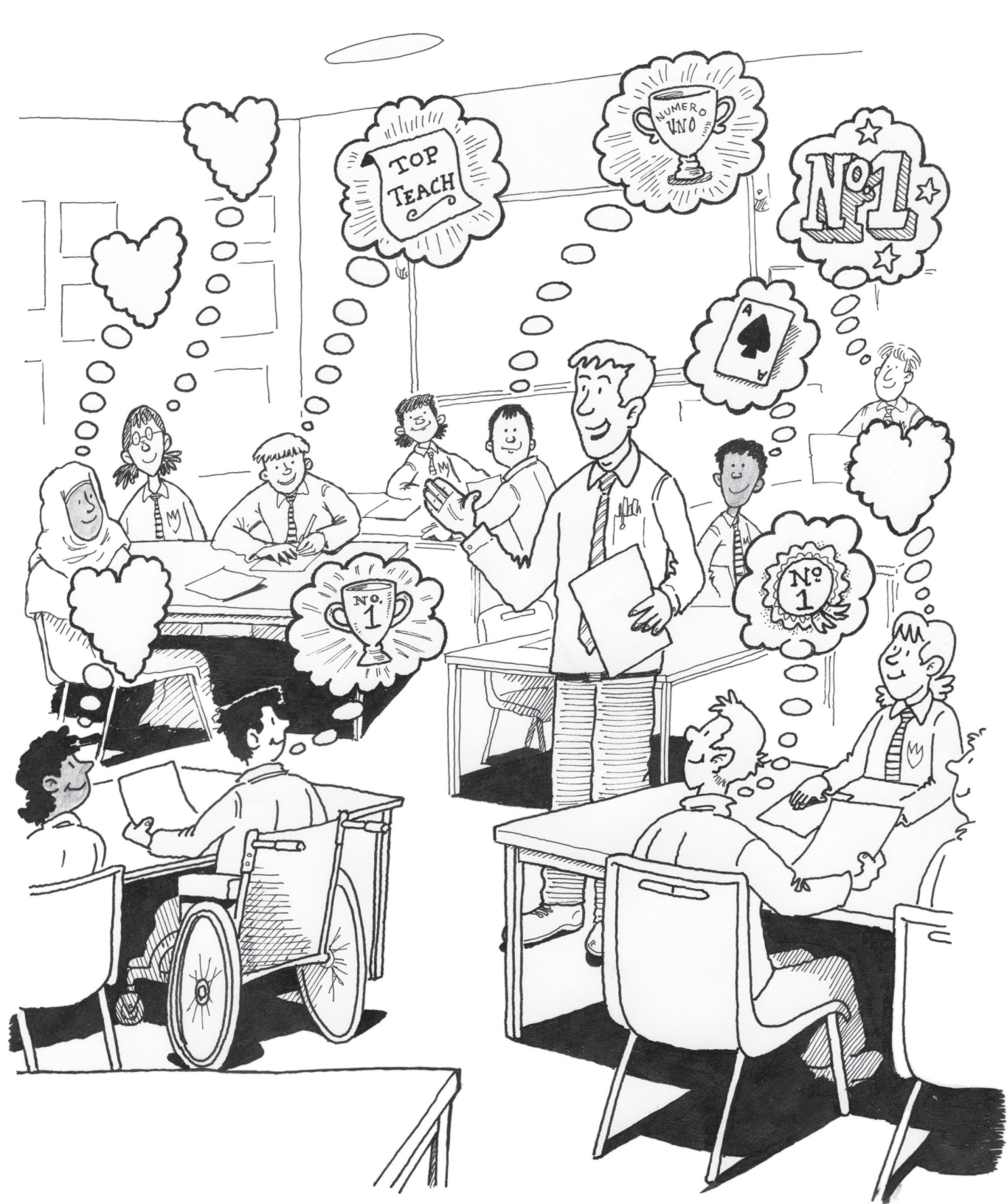
## Chapter 5

# The number one secret to effective classroom management

After 25 years of working with emotionally damaged and ‘difficult’ children, I’ve come to the conclusion that there is just one true key to successful behaviour management. It really doesn’t matter how many ‘proven’ strategies you have in your arsenal because without this, your efforts will almost certainly come unstuck. The secret ingredient, sadly overlooked by many teachers particularly those of the punishment-focused, oppressive variety is ... (drumroll please) a positive teacher–student relationship.

I once read the story of a teacher who returned to teaching after a career break and found himself struggling to manage the behaviour of his students. He was laughed at and ignored by the students and many of his lessons were completely out of control. This same teacher happened to have co-authored a highly respected book on classroom management, he was a qualified psychologist, a senior teacher with more than 15 years’ classroom experience and later became a university lecturer in teacher training. This presents something of a conundrum. Here we have a very experienced and intelligent teacher who finds himself totally unable to control his students, despite having written a comprehensive textbook on dealing with classroom behaviour problems. He knows all the theories, he’s got all the skills and strategies and yet he can’t get the kids to behave. What’s going on? How can this be?

Well, the answer is that he had no relationship with his new cohort of students – he didn’t know them and they didn’t know him. And because they didn’t know him, they could neither trust him nor respect him. How can you really trust someone you don’t know?



This teacher had returned to the classroom thinking that all the wonderful theories, strategies and case studies he had carefully explained in his book would help him swiftly brush aside any of the classroom problems he was likely to encounter. But he had forgotten one of the most important principles of successful teaching: students will always respond more positively to a teacher they know, like and trust; they will always work harder and behave better for a teacher they get on with. (I should add that this teacher was quick to realise his error and promptly set about resolving his predicament. He began focusing heavily on his relationship with the students and saw an almost immediate improvement in their attitudes and behaviour.)

It can be easy to blame the system – the school, the setting, the building, the students, the parents, the lack of support from senior staff, the policies – for disorder in the classroom, but these factors have no real relevance for the teacher who has a good relationship with his or her students. Teachers with relationships at the core of their practice are able to go into virtually any classroom, in any school, and succeed with even the most difficult of students.

In this chapter I'm going to show you some of the best, fast acting ideas and strategies I know of for building positive relationships with hard to reach students and becoming the teacher they respect and value. You really *can* get them to respond more constructively to your instructions and you really *can* see miraculous transformations in terms of their attitudes towards you when you make positive relationships a priority.

## Why bother with all this relationship building stuff?

Some teachers tell me they haven't got the time for this – their job is to teach students, not like them. They teach 300 students a week and could never get to know them all anyway. They have too much paperwork to do and so on. I sympathise – I've been there too. I know how much pressure teachers are under. So my best answer to the 'Why bother?' question is that doing this is actually going to *save* you time in the long run, and it will make your job much easier and far more enjoyable.

## Establishing and maintaining control

A few years ago I was talking with a friend of mine after delivering training at his school. He (let's call him John) told me a story about one of the teachers at the school (she can be called Janet for the purpose of this story and for the benefit of any Terry Wogan fans) who was struggling badly with one particular group of students. She just couldn't get them quiet.

John was Janet's head of department and he often had to pass through her room when she was teaching in order to get resources from the main store cupboard. He told me that on one particular day he happened to be passing through when Janet was teaching her most challenging group.

The students were literally out of control – screaming, shouting and totally ignoring Janet's cries to settle down. John didn't normally intervene unless asked to do so but he felt this situation was only going to get worse, so he walked around the room speaking quietly to some of the students for a few minutes. Without the need to raise his voice, a hush gradually descended on the room and the students returned to their seats facing Janet – happy faces, ready to work.

John quietly left the room and went about the rest of his day without giving the incident a second thought. At the end of the school day, when the students had left the premises, Janet caught up with John in the staffroom. 'John, how do you do that? How the hell do you manage to get that group so quiet so easily?' she asked. 'They won't do anything I say and yet they settle straight away for you. I spend the whole lesson fighting with them. What do you do? What is it? What's the secret?'

I'm sure she didn't expect the reply he gave her. She wanted a magic bullet, a sure-fire strategy, a new way of giving instructions, a secret hand signal or a never-fail script to follow. But I hope she understood the power of what he said and I hope you do too – it's priceless. It is the single, most important tool any teacher can develop and it leads to an enviable level of respect from your most challenging students.

'There's no magic to it,' he said. 'It just boils down to this: I *know* these kids. I've spent time with them. I go to support them playing football for the school at weekends, I chat with them in the corridor, I regularly speak to their parents on the telephone, I visit their homes, I've taken them on trips and I sit with them at lunchtime. The door to my room is always open to them – they know they can



come and chat when something's wrong – and I make a point of catching up with them whenever I can.'

I maintain, as my friend does, that there is no 'magic' to successful classroom management other than making positive relationships the foundation of your overall approach. With that said, here are some strategies to help.

## The two essential factors for building positive relationships fast

We know how important positive teacher–student relationships are and that they are at the heart of good teaching. But the big question is this: how do we go about building them? I mean, specifically, what are the *exact* steps that we should take in order to develop those positive, trusting bonds? It's one thing to know that we should do something; it's another thing entirely actually doing it – especially when you don't really know how.

As a senior teacher in a small student referral unit, I was well aware of this and spent a great deal of time trying to subtly encourage and advise other members of staff on how they could best get on with our more challenging students. Eventually I found that the simplest way of thinking about a relationship is as a kind of account – a relationship account, a bit like a bank account. When we want to grow the money in our bank account we make deposits and we get money back in the form of interest. So, the more money we put in, the more we get back out. In other words, we have to *give* in order to *receive*.

The principle is much the same with a relationship account – the more we put into the relationship account, the more we get back out. But we don't put in money (unless, of course, we're talking about the relationship with our own children). We make our deposits with something very different and much more valuable – we give ourselves. And we do it in two ways: by showing the other person we care about them and by communicating frequently with them.

If you think about the important relationships in your life – those with your spouse, your friends, your family – you will see that this is true. You simply cannot



have a positive, flourishing relationship unless communication of some sort is taking place regularly. We are almost constantly connecting through speech (face to face, mobile, Skype, etc.) and the written word (text, letters, Facebook, email, etc.). We show we care by showing interest in each other's problems, helping each other, doing favours, saying nice things, giving gifts, going to the in-laws for lunch and so on.

By concentrating solely on these two essential factors – frequent communication and showing we care – I believe we have the simplest possible formula for building relationships with our students. We're going to be exploring multiple ways of doing this in this chapter.

If you doubt the efficacy of this, let me tell you another story about someone who used these two factors as the main tool for building positive relationships in his sales career – with dramatic results. Joe Girard used to be a car salesman and earned the title 'world's greatest salesman.' As you can imagine, you have to sell a lot of cars to reach the title of the greatest salesman in the world. Joe managed to do it a staggering 12 years in a row. He attributes his success largely to the relationships he had with his customers, and the way he went about building relationships with those customers is utterly fascinating yet remarkably simple.

Basically, all he did was this: whenever he met someone – in the street, in a shop, at a party, wherever – he would ask their name and address and enter them into his database. From that moment on, every month, these people would get a handwritten greetings card from Joe. Inside the card would be a brief but warm message along the lines of, 'Hey I was just thinking about you, Best wishes, Joe Girard' or 'Hey! I hope everything's going great for you, All the best, Joe Girard'.

At his peak, Joe was sending out more than 14,000 handwritten greetings cards *every month* – about 500 handwritten cards a day – and at that point he was employing three staff just to help him write them! Now, you might be wondering why a salesman would bother sending out all those cards, particularly when there was no mention of selling anything in them. All he was doing was keeping in touch and sending a warm greeting to people he barely knew. But think about this: most people change their car every few years. Who do you think was first in the minds of each of those 14,000 people when they next thought about replacing their vehicle?

You can see that Joe's formula for building relationships – communicating frequently with each person and then showing that he cared about them – matches ours perfectly. So let's find out how to apply these two essential factors to the classroom setting.

## Frequent communication

As we've discussed, all relationships have frequent communication at their heart. You can't have a relationship of any kind unless communication is involved in some form, so it's not surprising we have poor relationships with our most challenging students. We're usually among the last people they would choose to sit down with for a nice friendly chat.

And besides, talking with them is actually very difficult – getting them to open up and start communicating is almost impossible in some cases, especially when you don't know them very well.

It's a vicious circle: you can't get to know them until you have something to talk about and you have little to talk about with them until you get to know them better. Clearly we need a subject they actually want to talk about so our first step is to find out their likes, hobbies and passions. We have more chance of getting them to talk with us if we talk about something which actually interests them.

Clearly, once you know their passions you can easily strike up conversation with them – you have a subject to chat about which will engage them. For example, if their favourite subject turns out to be mountain biking you could:

- Ask their advice about new bikes or related equipment. (We all like to be able to show how knowledgeable we are about a subject, particularly if it's our favourite one. Don't get me started about quinoa ...)
- Share stories you've seen on television about mountain biking.
- Compile a list of websites on mountain biking and say, 'Here Jonny, you said you were into mountain biking – I found these websites you might like to look at ...'

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- Find relevant old books/magazines or newspaper clippings and offer them to look at in their spare time.
- Ask them about their bike or their riding adventures – perhaps they ride in competitions.
- Ask their advice on local tracks or courses.
- Take your own bike into school and ask them to show you how to fix it (young people love being given opportunity to show off their expertise).
- Sell them that old mountain bike you never got around to putting on eBay.

Now, we could just ask them what they enjoy doing in their spare time, and some of the friendlier students will be more than happy to tell us. But this method won't work with very angry, antisocial students – particularly those in their teens: 'So tell me, Jonny, what do you do at weekends?' 'Eh? It's nowt to do with you!'

We need to be a little less forward with these students and use methods that fly under their radar. I've found the following ideas to be very useful for discovering students' interests without getting their hackles up.



### The record card questionnaire

I got this idea from my dear, late father. He was a wise man and his advice was always reliable so you can use it with confidence. Record cards are used by a salesman to record a client's personal information so he can be more familiar with his customer on his next visit. Each time he returns to the same client and has a conversation, the client reveals a little more about his interests and life in general, and this information can be added to the card. These titbits gradually build up and form a library of useful information which can be drawn on during the next meeting, and gradually the relationship deepens and develops as the client and salesman have more to talk about. It just speeds up the natural process of trust building and information sharing which would otherwise take much longer.

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It's obvious to see that the salesman who does this will get on better with his client and probably sell more widgets into the bargain.

Salesman A (who has spent time recording his client's personal details on his record card): Hey John, how are you this week? How's Lillian? You haven't forgotten her birthday on Friday have you? I brought you this booklet on carpet cleaning after your little accident last week. Now then, shall I show you this new line?

Salesman B (who has taken no interest in his client): Hello Mr Smith. Would you like to buy our new product? No? Oh okay. Bye then.

### Record Card Questionnaire

#### Tv & Film

What is the best film you've ever seen on DVD?

What is the best film you've ever seen at the cinema?

List 3 films you've recently seen that you enjoyed.

- 
- 
- 

What are your 3 favourite TV programmes?

- 
- 
-

## Establishing and maintaining control

You can see from this that the record card is a great way of reducing the time normally spent getting to know someone. I have adapted this for classroom use by making it into a fun questionnaire for students to fill in – the record card questionnaire. They can complete this in registration periods, free periods, breaktimes, getting to know you sessions, social skills lessons or as an early finisher exercise. I used to give the questionnaire to new students at the start of term and let them fill it in as a first lesson exercise, a registration fill-in or as a wet break activity. The thing to remember is to give it them when they are in a reasonably good mood and when they have enough time to think about their answers.

Once you've got their completed questionnaires, go through the answers and pick out the main themes – the three or four key things they seem to be most passionate about – and record these in the teacher's notes box on the first page.



You can download a copy of the record card questionnaire from: [www.noisyclass.com/bookresources](http://www.noisyclass.com/bookresources).

The downloadable questionnaire is only a starting point – you may need to edit questions for your own use depending on the age group you're working with. I have used it successfully with students up to Year 10 (age 15) by phrasing the questions to suit.

So what do you do with the results? Here are a few ways you can use the information from the completed questionnaires:

- Increase the effectiveness of spontaneous rewards by tailoring them to appeal to students' interests. For example, if you have a student who is nuts about a certain breed of dog, there is no point in giving her a sticker with a picture of a tractor on it! (You'll find out more about spontaneous rewards in Chapter 6.)
- Provide appealing reading material for breaktimes, quiet reading sessions and registration – choose magazines, journals and books that relate to their specific areas of interest.
- Plan really interesting lessons. You might choose to prepare a series of lessons for the whole class around a topic that several students are interested in, or

Are you fed up with students who talk over you and ignore your instructions?

Are you tired, drained and worn out because of low level disruption, disobedience and defiance?

Do you long for a workable, practical system to help you take control and enjoy stress-free teaching?

If you answered 'yes' to any of those questions you'll love the highly effective, proven strategies in ***Take Control of the Noisy Class***. In a friendly and accessible style, teacher-trainer Rob Plevin explains a clear, step-by-step plan for successfully managing the most challenging groups and individuals in today's toughest classrooms. Packed with powerful, fast-acting techniques – including a novel routine to get any class quiet in 15 seconds or less – the book helps teachers transform their ability to connect and succeed with hard-to-reach, reluctant learners. Even if you have never had 'the class from hell', you'll find hundreds of practical, useable ideas and interventions to meet students' needs and create a thoroughly enjoyable classroom climate for all concerned.

Super-effective classroom management strategies for today's toughest classrooms. Relevant to teachers of all age groups.

These down-to-earth, sensible strategies will be immediately useful to educators working with students of any age.

Dr Rich Allen, [greenlighteducation.net](http://greenlighteducation.net)

How I wish I'd had these strategies when I first began to teach.

Pat Wyman, MA, author of *Amazing Grades* and founder, [HowToLearn.com](http://HowToLearn.com)

*Take Control of the Noisy Class* helps us to do just what the title promises. I strongly recommend it.

Geoff Barton, head teacher, King Edward VI School

This book will make any teacher who has ever struggled with an unruly class or troublesome student feel that they now have the understanding and tools to solve their own classroom problems.

Isabella Wallace, teacher, author and education consultant



**Rob Plevin** is a behaviour management trainer who has successfully taught in some of the most challenging settings. As a deputy head teacher he helped take a pupil referral unit out of special measures; Rob believes that any situation can be turned around, no matter how tough. No stranger to behaviour issues himself, Rob was politely 'asked to leave' school as a teenager. Despite his rocky route through the education system he achieved his dream of becoming a teacher. Rob now runs training courses internationally for teachers, lecturers, parents and care workers on needs-focused teaching, behaviour management and student motivation. [www.noisyclass.com](http://www.noisyclass.com)

