

Research briefing 02

Managing challenging behaviour

This is one of a series of briefing notes exploring key themes from the Welsh Government's Learner Voice Wales survey. It summarises the positive and negative views expressed by learners, and messages from research on managing challenging behaviour. We've used this to suggest action points for providers to consider, and further resources for those interested in exploring the topic in more depth.

What did learners say?

- Many learners made positive comments about the supportive atmosphere on their course, good cooperation between learners, and the fact that they were studying with others who shared their aspirations and 'want to work'. However, others found it frustrating that not everyone shared the same attitude.
- In FE institutions, students value being treated as adults, and contrast the college environment positively with that of school. A number of learners welcome being made responsible for their own learning and feel that they will make good progress if they choose to work hard.
- Most learners recognise that there is a trade-off between being treated with respect, and behaving responsibly; they like the friendly relationship with tutors but accept that a relaxed, fun environment is dependent on doing their work and adhering to agreed rules.
- Age differences are sometimes a source of tension, with adult learners commenting that younger groups could cause disturbances. This was mentioned by learners both in colleges and work-based learning centres.
- Where tutors handle disruptive behaviour firmly, some learners welcome this, seeing it as 'taking no nonsense' and making the situation better for the rest of the group. However, in several cases, learners felt that in imposing discipline, tutors had treated them unfairly and failed to listen to them.
- Some learners commented that bullying is dealt with well and that their providers do a great deal to try to ensure that difference is accepted and understood. 'Zero tolerance' policies for bad behaviour are generally welcomed. In fact, many felt that standards of discipline should be stricter and that 'those who don't want to be here should be removed'.
- A few learners felt that staff need training on controlling bad behaviour, and ensuring that disruptive students do not dominate at the expense of the group as a whole.
- Others made suggestions on how the structure of learning delivery could help to keep everyone focused and under control, particularly through use of smaller groups.
- Particular areas of concern included:
 - levels of noise in learning resource centres, and space being taken up for socialising rather than studying
 - poor behaviour and bullying on buses
 - disruptive use of mobile phones in class
 - interruptions and lack of respect for tutors
 - intimidation by groups of students around public areas in colleges.

Effective strategies for managing behaviour

The strategies below are drawn from a range of publications on managing challenging behaviour, which in turn are based on extensive research into 'what works' in post-16 settings. For further reading, see the 'Resources' section at the end of this briefing.

Establishing a whole-provider approach

If your provider doesn't already have a policy on behaviour, consider preparing one. This will give learners clear boundaries on what is acceptable, provide a framework of guidance and support for staff, and give you a basis for risk management, staff development and monitoring. The policy should be based on an agreed definition of 'challenging' or 'disruptive' behaviour.

The Learning and Skills Development Agency suggested one possible definition of challenging behaviour as:

- behaviour that disrupts routine teaching to an extent that challenges the teacher's resources and the concentration of other learners
- behaviour that is offensive or violent, interfering with routine activity
- behaviour which bullies or ridicules fellow learners and creates an intimidating environment
- extreme passivity or non-engagement in learning
- intermittent patterns of attendance

What's your problem? Working with learners with challenging behaviour¹ (LSDA, 2007)

However, it is important for each individual provider to develop its own definition which reflects the organisation's values, learner profile and the nature of learning it delivers. You may find that individual members of staff (and learners) have their own definitions and thresholds of what they consider 'acceptable' so, for consistency of approach, discussion and negotiation is essential.

Ain't Misbehavin'² recommends wide consultation to help give everyone ownership of the policy and to help inform more detailed action planning, such as the identification of staff training needs. Consider, too, how behaviour management could be integrated with other policies such as your equality and diversity strategy, learner charter, complaints procedures or anti-bullying policy.

The LSDA's research found that for many staff, difficulties arose because they had to deal with individual disruptive incidents alone, without the support of the organisation. In other cases, providers realised that challenging behaviour was occurring in particular subject areas or locations, and improvements could only be achieved through a whole-organisation approach, implemented consistently.

The library is often overcrowded and we are unable to book a computer and the staff do not act when people are swearing and misbehaving.

Setting standards of acceptable behaviour

Wherever possible, rules should be agreed in collaboration with learners; this means that they will have ownership, should understand the reasons rules have been set, and may even help to enforce them.

Setting rules

1. It may be more productive to discuss and negotiate rules, rather than to simply impose them.
2. The more rules you have to enforce, the less time you have for teaching and learning. One rule may be sufficient, if it's the right one, e.g. 'Everyone must listen quietly to instructions before starting on their task'.
3. The rules should reflect your primary purpose: to support learning, e.g. a rule that all learners must stay in their places won't work in situations where it may be useful for one learner to help another).
4. Avoid direct confrontation wherever possible – it can cause an already difficult situation to escalate. Leave yourself somewhere to go.

Adapted from *Managing Behaviour and Motivating Students in Further Education* by Susan Wallace (Learning Matters, 2002)

Dave Vizard³ suggests that rules should be established in the first session with a new group, then reinforced through each session's structure by:

- establishing a 'take-up time' at the beginning of the session, to allow the learners to settle before getting on with their work
- setting out defined learning aims and clear instructions
- agreeing how transitions will take place between different types of work
- settling the group at the end of the session and for the orderly exit of learners.

So many lessons are one long round of 'Put your phones away!' and 'It's rude to talk while I'm talking...' Other students who are genuinely interested in the course and want to learn are affected by constant interruptions and disruptive behaviour.

Building learner motivation

Learner Voice Wales feedback shows how important fairness is to learners – and how difficult it can be to get it right. Learners can be tough in their judgement of disruptive peers, wanting them excluded or, at least, punished. At the same time, those being disciplined can feel that they are being 'singled out' unfairly.

Establishing a behaviour management policy, and ensuring that it is implemented fairly, will go a long way towards motivating learners. Practitioners can also use teaching and curriculum planning strategies to help ensure that learning is engaging for the whole group.

A 2007 [review](#)⁴ of attendance and behaviour strategies, carried out for the Welsh Government, found that low-level disruption is far more common than extreme or threatening behaviour, but that it can have a cumulative impact on teachers over time. The review highlighted the importance of:

- individualised/personalised learning, with small, attainable successes built in
- varied teaching style and pace
- positive relationships with peers
- flexible and creative approaches.

Some practical strategies for motivating vocational learners

1. Use **initial interviews and induction** to help establish clear expectations, by giving the learner a full understanding of programme content, progression opportunities and standards of behaviour, and giving them an opportunity to reveal any concerns or barriers.
2. **Structure provision** to reduce the risk of challenging behaviour, e.g. by:
 - adjusting group sizes to ensure that everyone gets sufficient attention
 - using shorter sessions with regular breaks to help learners stay focused
 - referring learners to motivational/personal development provision if they need extra support
 - ensuring that the learning environment is fit for purpose, attractive, uncrowded and safe.
3. Clearly link provision to **progression/employment opportunities**, e.g. by:
 - using case studies and mentoring to show how other learners have succeeded
 - arranging for employers to meet learners and describe their vacancies
 - reinforcing expectations of professional behaviour.

*Managing challenging behaviour within skills provision for unemployed adults*⁵ (NIACE, 2012)

While your organisation may have an overall behaviour management policy, each group will have its own dynamics and what works with one group, at one particular time, may not work with another. A comprehensive programme of professional development, including opportunities to share good practice and case studies, will help to ensure that staff have a repertoire of techniques that they can call on – and that they can use proportionately, without quashing discussion and debate.

The staff are not too serious, they are fine with talking in the lessons provided work is done, this keeps people from getting bored and encourages us to ask questions as we do not feel we have disturbed the silence.

Action plan

- Consider undertaking a self-assessment to identify how well your provider identifies and addresses challenging behaviour. *Ain't Misbehavin'* includes a self-assessment framework and some helpful suggestions on action planning.
- Ensure that a whole-organisation strategy is in place for managing challenging behaviour, including clear behavioural standards and disciplinary procedures that can be followed consistently across the provider.
- Incorporate behavioural standards into induction for both staff and learners.
- Establish a comprehensive programme of staff development on managing challenging behaviour, and ensure that part-time and support staff are included.
- Make sure that mechanisms are in place to support staff, including mentoring and 'emergency' procedures that can be followed if things get out of control.
- Involve learners in setting rules for individual classes/groups, including a focus on health and safety matters in practical settings.
- When rules have been agreed, ensure that they are followed and seen to be followed.
- Establish monitoring procedures to ensure that your systems for dealing with challenging behaviour are working consistently and effectively, including feedback from staff and learners.

Resources

- ***Ain't Misbehavin'***⁶ (Further Education Development Agency, 1998)
This comprehensive manual sets out guidance on establishing a whole-organisation approach to tackling disruptive behaviour.
- ***What's your problem? Working with learners with challenging behaviour***⁷ (Learning and Skills Development Agency, 2007)
Guidance for post-16 providers on establishing an inclusive learning environment.
- ***Managing challenging behaviour within skills provision for unemployed adults***⁸ (NIACE, 2012)
Guidance based on research commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.
- ***How to manage behaviour in further education*** by Dave Vizard (Sage, 2007)
This book is full of practical strategies, and includes a CD-ROM with 20 staff development activities.
- ***Managing Behaviour and Motivating Students in Further Education*** by Susan Wallace (Learning Matters, 2002)
Designed to support practitioners' development, this book draws on a wide range of learner and teacher case studies.

Learner Voice Wales

Learner Voice Wales is the Welsh Government's annual survey of learners in further education, work-based learning, adult community learning and Welsh for Adults. Launched in 2013, it seeks learners' views on a range of topics relating to:

- information, advice and guidance
- support
- teaching and learning
- well-being and responsiveness
- Welsh-medium learning
- overall satisfaction.

Learners are also asked to comment on what they like best about their learning provider, and what they think could be improved.

A summary of the survey is available at <http://gov.wales/learnervoice>.

For more information, please e-mail post16quality@wales.gsi.gov.uk.

¹ *What's your problem? Working with learners with challenging behaviour* (Learning and Skills Development Agency, 2007)
www.itslifejimbutoctasweknowit.org.uk/files/LSDA_WhatsyourProblem.pdf

² *Ain't Misbehavin'* (Further Education Development Agency, 1998)
<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED421654>

³ Dave Vizard's Behaviour Solutions website
www.behaviourmatters.com/index.php

⁴ *A Review of 'Attendance and Behaviour' Reports and Guidance Issued by Government and Government Agencies in the British Isles* (The Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties Association, 2007)
<http://learning.gov.wales/docs/learningwales/publications/121127reviewattendanceandbehaviour.pdf>

⁵ *Managing challenging behaviour within skills provision for unemployed adults* (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2012)
www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Managing%20Challenging%20Behaviour%20Within%20Skills%20Provision%20for%20Unemployed%20Adults.pdf

⁶ *Ain't Misbehavin'* (Further Education Development Agency, 1998)
<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED421654>

⁷ *What's your problem? Working with learners with challenging behaviour* (Learning and Skills Development Agency, 2007)
www.itslifejimbutoctasweknowit.org.uk/files/LSDA_WhatsyourProblem.pdf

⁸ *Managing challenging behaviour within skills provision for unemployed adults* (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2012)
www.niace.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Managing%20Challenging%20Behaviour%20Within%20Skills%20Provision%20for%20Unemployed%20Adults.pdf