

SECOND
EDITION

POWER Struggles

Successful
Techniques
for Educators

Allen N. Mendler

Brian D. Mendler

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555 North Morton Street

Bloomington, IN 47404

800.733.6786 (toll free) / 812.336.7700

FAX: 812.336.7790

email: info@solution-tree.com

solution-tree.com

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About the Authors



Allen N. Mendler, PhD, has worked extensively with children of all ages in general and special education settings. An experienced educator and school psychologist, he has consulted for many schools, as well as day and residential centers throughout the world, providing training on classroom management, discipline, and best practices for motivating difficult students. His work focuses on developing effective frameworks and strategies for educators, youth professionals, and parents to help youth at risk succeed.

An accomplished author, Allen's titles include *Motivating Students Who Don't Care*; *Connecting With Students*; *What Do I Do When . . . ?*; *MORE What Do I Do When . . . ?*; and *Handling Difficult Parents*. He coauthored *Discipline With Dignity* and *Discipline With Dignity for Challenging Youth* with Richard L. Curwin. His latest video set, *The Four Keys to Effective Classroom and Behavior Management*, which he developed with Curwin and Brian Mendler, won the 2007 Association of Educational Publishers Distinguished Achievement Award in School/Class Management Technology. In addition to his books and staff development programs, Allen has published articles in *Educational Leadership*, *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, and *Parenting*.

An acclaimed presenter, Allen has presented for such educational organizations as the Teacher Learning Center, Discipline Associates, Phi Delta Kappa, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and Reclaiming Children and Youth. His Discipline With Dignity program was made the official program of the New York State United Teachers. Training and workshops on this program have been provided to tens of thousands of educators in schools throughout North America, Europe, Japan, and Israel.

Allen earned his undergraduate degree in psychology and education from Queens College, master's degree in psychology from Alfred University, and doctorate in school psychology from Union Graduate School.



Brian D. Mendler is president of the Teacher Learning Center and is a highly sought-after consultant. The strategies he shares with K–12 teachers and administrators are practical and timely, and most importantly, they work with difficult and disruptive students. Brian has extensive experience working with challenging students in general education, self-contained, and inclusion classrooms. He is also an adjunct professor at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York, where he teaches behavior management and introductory special education classes.

Brian's book *Tips 4 Teachers* is an easy-to-read, practical resource that provides educators with specific strategies from the Discipline With Dignity approach to behavior management. Brian is also the author of *The Taming of the Crew* and is coauthor, with Richard Curwin and Allen Mendler, of *Discipline With Dignity, 3rd edition*, and *Strategies for Successful Classroom Management*. In addition, Brian contributed to the video program *The Four Keys to Effective Classroom and Behavior Management* featuring Curwin and Allen Mendler.

Brian graduated from the State University of New York at Fredonia with majors in communication and video production and minors in English and journalism. He earned a master's degree from D'Youville College in Buffalo, New York. Brian is a volunteer for the

Big Brothers Big Sisters program and for Special Olympics track-and-field and softball programs.

Visit Allen and Brian Mendler's Teacher Learning Center website, www.tlc-sems.com, for more tips and strategies.

To book Allen or Brian for professional development, contact pd@solution-tree.com.

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Introduction to the Second Edition

Inappropriate behavior that leads to power struggles consumes too much instructional time in too many classrooms. Minor disruptions quickly escalate into classroom battles, eroding relationships and respect. This practical handbook is designed to provide the busy educator with specific strategies of prevention so that power struggles occur less often. By understanding what motivates students to challenge the teacher's authority, it is often quite possible to get ahead of the curve by interacting with the most difficult students in ways that will make them want to behave. This book will show you how. It also includes easy-to-learn methods of intervention that take little time and that maintain the teacher's authority and the student's dignity.

This second edition offers many new strategies of prevention and intervention, tweaks some of the strategies from the original to make their use even more effective, and adds more details as well as examples to make this volume even more user-friendly. Since the emphasis of this book is on practical strategies, there is a relative absence of the guiding theoretical framework. Interested educators can refer to several of our prior publications, which are listed in the references and resources.

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When Kids Push Our Buttons

At six years old, Curtis is already a handful. He is often out of his seat, doesn't do much of his work, and likes to bully others. He is at his worst in the least supervised places like the cafeteria, hallway, and playground. When told what to do, he rarely complies. Ms. Lane has called home several times, taken recess away, changed his seat numerous times, and used stars and stickers to little avail. The color-coded (red, yellow, green) system of discipline that works for most of the "good" kids does little to influence Curtis. He misbehaves his way to "red" by 10:00 a.m. most days and therefore loses privileges.

Devon, Sherry, and Latoya are older and text their friends rather than focus on the lesson. Mrs. Martin tells each of them to put away their phones. Within seconds, they are back at it. Mrs. Martin warns that she will take the phones away, but Devon tells her that she has no right to do that. She reminds him that she is the teacher and therefore has every right to take it. Unafraid, he continues his defiance, and Mrs. Martin eventually sends him to the principal. Sherry and Latoya comply for a moment, but as soon as Mrs. Martin's back is turned, they begin texting again. Meanwhile, Julio has his head down on his desk. When called on, he has no idea what is going on and says, "This is stupid." Carl tells him to shut up, after which Samantha tells Carl to shut up. These skirmishes go on for several minutes interspersed with an occasional reference to the day's lesson.

Just as things have settled down, Devon walks back in unaccompanied from the office. Although he seemed to see the error of his ways with the principal and promised to be good upon returning to class, he continues right where he left off. He makes noises and funny faces while waving his cell phone. Exasperated, Mrs. Martin resumes her efforts to gain control with minimal success.

Next door, Ms. Highland welcomes a new student to her special education resource class. Jermaine recently returned home after living in a group home for a year due to a number of problems, including active displays of hostility toward authority figures. On his first day, Jermaine is distantly quiet in class as Ms. Highland leads an academic discussion. Toward the very end of class, Ms. Highland attempts to engage him.

She says, “Jermaine, because you’re a new student in our class, I am interested in hearing any thoughts, ideas, or impressions you have of our class.”

Jermaine stares ahead; then, without changing expression, he looks directly at Ms. Highland and says, “I think this class sucks!” Some students become intensely quiet as they await Ms. Highland’s response, while others take on more of a “What are you going to do about it?” posture.

Ms. Highland takes a few deep breaths, scratches her head, looks directly at Jermaine, and says matter-of-factly, “Jermaine, there may be some truth to that. Maybe after class, you can tell me how you think things could get better here. Thanks for speaking your mind.” Unrattled, she deftly redirects the class back to the lesson.

After class, she meets with Jermaine, asks him a bit about what led him to his opinion, and then lets him know that, in the future, she would appreciate him sharing his specific thoughts in a more appropriate way. She gives him an example of how he could let her know in the future. She says, “Jermaine, I might be a little old fashioned, but just so you know, I am way more likely to listen when I hear words like ‘I didn’t like the class’ or ‘I thought it was boring’ rather than ‘This class sucks.’ Now what was it that turned you off?”

Jermaine shares a few details and without any prompting, he apologizes.

Although most students who misbehave and escalate a power struggle are almost always struggling with issues unrelated to the problem at hand, how we respond to the challenging moment and what we do afterward can strongly affect whether or not these problems continue, get worse, or improve. Too often, behaviors like Curtis's and those of Mrs. Martin's students exhaust the teacher and erode the classroom climate needed for success. While not all challenging moments end as successfully as Jermaine and Ms. Highland's, there are many things educators can learn to say and do to defuse power struggles effectively. This book offers a variety of specific ways of doing just that.

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Preparing for Power Struggles

We estimate that 70 to 80 percent of challenging student behavior is primarily attributable to factors outside the school, such as dysfunctional families, unsupportive parents, inability to see how success at school will matter in life, violence in society, the effects of drugs and alcohol, a culture that too often values fast and easy solutions, and fragmented communities. While teachers are rarely the root cause of these behaviors, there is much we can do to keep these behaviors from occurring or escalating in our classrooms.

Power struggles develop when students refuse to follow the rules, fail to accept a consequence, or follow the rules and even accept the consequences, but do so with an attitude. Some students are actively defiant and challenge authority at every turn, while others are quietly hostile, like those who refuse to talk or do their work.

Although passive-aggressive students can be frustrating to work with, the authority of the educator is most obviously challenged by students who are verbally and actively challenging. Not only is a power struggle occurring between the teacher and student, but a classroom full of onlookers (students) usually watches every move. Most educators feel angry when students push their buttons, and they let their anger take hold by pushing back. While giving in to the fight-or-flight response is understandable, doing so only serves

Many teachers report the following forms of verbal defiance from their students:

- You can't make me!
- You're not my mother!
- Whatever!
- No!
- When are we going to ever use this?
- This class is boring.
- That's stupid.
- This class sucks!
- My mama will _____.

Examples of nonverbal active defiance include:

- Continuously coming in late
- Making noises
- Flipping off the teacher (middle finger raised)
- Smirking
- Throwing things
- Sitting slouched or with arms crossed
- Bothering others

to escalate the situation, leading to a no-win outcome. Typically, the final move used by the teacher is to either isolate the student in time-out or send the student to the office. Rarely do these solutions work.

Unfortunately, teachers are set up on day one at a huge disadvantage in numbers. In most classrooms, there are at least twenty-five students but only one teacher. However, great discipline and classroom management can level the playing field, and every teacher can learn these skills and defuse power struggles before they begin. These skills will be effective year after year, because students are extremely predictable. The faces change every year, but the behaviors remain the same. This is a good thing! In addition, teaching is one of

the most predictable professions in the entire world. Think about it. We know the exact days of the week we are going to work, the exact times we are going to work, and the exact place we are going to be. In what other profession do the customers (students) return every single day even if the product (teaching and curriculum) isn't viewed as satisfactory? We teachers have more control and knowledge than we sometimes realize; we gain wisdom through our experience working with all kinds of students.

Knowing what difficult students are going to do before they do it helps us prepare a response to their challenges. A power struggle is similar to a bad storm—doesn't it end up being much worse when you didn't know it was coming? When properly prepared with food, shelter, and maybe a good book or new release, the storm can actually become a break from the daily grind. When a teacher is properly prepared with the right strategies, inappropriate student behavior can actually present an opportunity to teach and show students how and why they are expected to behave. We will provide you with strategies to help keep the storm away. Just as importantly, though, we will show you how to forecast and understand which supplies to keep with you and use in case the storm hits. Part of this prediction stems from understanding root causes of behavior.

Understanding Why and How Students Misbehave

Understanding the *why* behind misbehavior is key in figuring out what needs to be done to fix it. Think of the behavior (calling you names, throwing a chair, not sitting still) as a stomachache. A stomachache is usually a symptom of something else: overeating, food poisoning, flu. If you take an antacid, the symptom might go away for a short period of time, but the condition might get worse. When we understand the root cause of a behavior, we can tailor the “medicine” to fit the individual issues.

Fortunately, there are highly predictable categories that help us understand why students misbehave. They include the need for:

- Attention
- Power or control

- Competence
- Belonging

Memorize these reasons, and you will quickly be able to dissect the root cause of a misbehavior, which will allow you to figure out the proper strategy to fix the problem.

Attention

There are two types of attention-seeking kids. The first type gets little if any attention at home or elsewhere. In his mind, bad attention is better than no attention. He acts out because then people notice him. Being the disruptive kid has become his identity. What do you do? Shower him with attention for doing anything well—and we mean *anything*. Walking into a class correctly, making eye contact, having a good twenty minutes . . . praise him like crazy, but be sure to do it privately. Public praising turns off a lot of difficult kids because many feel they have to act cool to save face with their peers, while others may think you are trying to manipulate them to be “good” more often. When he acts out, he needs to be ignored. This will be difficult, but remember the root of his problem is the desire for attention. Do not waver; only give attention for positive behaviors that you want to encourage.

The second type of attention-seeking kid gets too much attention at home. She usually has parents who make excuses for her. She is coddled and spoiled. She goes to bed when she wants, eats what she wants, and rarely has to share anything. Once she’s old enough, she comes to school. School is all about doing everything she has never had to do at home: wait in line, take turns, say please and thank you, raise her hand. She must learn to live without constant attention and instant gratification. Offering a positive challenge usually works better with this student. For example, a teacher might say to a student who hates standing in line, “Just about anybody can complain about not getting his or her way. Not everyone is able to take turns. I guess we’ll see if you have what it takes!” Notice how the symptom (the desire for attention) is the same, but the medicine is different.

Power or Control

All humans want to feel like they have some influence and control in their lives. In fact, a lot of rigorous research confirms that the feeling of control—the belief that you have the power to influence and shape even small aspects of your fate—can have an enormous impact on one’s well-being. In a classic study, Langer and Rodin (1976) found that patients in nursing homes who were given small choices about such things as which nights to attend movies, what time to have their meals, and how to arrange their furniture not only engaged in more recreational activities than patients without these choices, but they had a 50 percent lower death rate at an eighteen-month follow-up. Much of our research (Curwin, Mendler, & Mendler, 2008) has shown that when students are given a voice in developing and modifying classroom rules, they are much more apt to follow those rules as opposed to rules developed only by the teacher.

School is often not set up for giving or sharing control, however. Students are told what to do, when to do it, and how long they have to get it done. Giving students a sense of control is especially important when you want to change their behaviors. After all, students make the decision to act out or not. We have seen various attempts at encouraging student engagement in changing their behaviors. When we visited a school in Arkansas, for example, an elementary teacher used a “boat system” to try to modify student behavior. Down the left-hand side of a big chart on the wall, each student’s name was written on a cardboard cut-out boat. Across the top were three different categories: your boat was smooth sailing, your boat was in rocky water, or your ship had sunk!

The teacher asked what we thought about her system. Our first question was, “Who moves the boat?” Not who literally moves the cardboard cut-out, but who decides when the boat moves from one column to another? If the student has a say in deciding, we like the

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