

The basic techniques and strategies

A few pages ago, you read that the main behaviour management task of TAs is to keep students on task. This begs the question: how do you do it? If you have children of your own or have worked in the education sector before, you might feel confident and have a few behaviour management tricks up your sleeve. The normal reaction to a student being off task is to say something like, 'get back on with it please' and to then repeat if necessary. Another option is to raise your voice just a little and to give a stern look. For the average parent helper, these techniques are more than enough.

Unfortunately though, these basic home-based strategies have limited effects in the school environment. For example, you probably don't want to say 'please get back on with it' 150 times per day. Professional (and paid) TAs need to have a much more comprehensive repertoire of behaviour management strategies. This section will introduce you to the most effective (and basic) strategies that all TAs need to master.

Hint

Research has shown that students actually prefer classes where the teacher and other staff are clearly in control, provided that staff are cooperative, fair and not too rigid (Brekelmans et al., 2002; Davidson, 1999).

1. Situational awareness

Also known as 'with-it-ness', situational awareness is about knowing what's going on around you at all times. You need to know what's happening in front of you, to your left, right, behind you, on the other side of the classroom – the entire room, and even outside. While helping a small group or an individual, use your peripheral vision to alert you to any possible situations that require your attention. In other words, don't 'zone out' the rest of the class and focus solely on the 1-2 students in front of you. Situational awareness is like having 'eyes in the back of your head' and it allows you to put out 'fires' before they begin. Research by Schuldheisz and Van Der Mars (2001) showed that *active supervision*

increases on-task learning from about 50% to 70% compared to *passive supervision* (i.e., when staff don't give their full attention).

For example, imagine you are working with a group of students on their spelling. The teacher is called to the door as a message has been sent from the office. While dealing with that, another group on the opposite side of the room becomes gradually louder. While the teacher is not looking at them directly, she is aware of the situation and hopes that you will step in. Because you practise situational awareness, you notice the group becoming more boisterous and take the necessary steps to get them back on task. The teacher is very appreciative of your help as you have prevented a ripple effect of behavioural issues that may have unsettled the whole class.

2. Proximity and positioning



Notice how this TA is sitting with her back to the wall and in the centre of the group. This gives her an unimpeded view of the entire class so she can work with this group while keeping an eye out for issues elsewhere.

Ever noticed how your behaviour changes when you find yourself in close proximity to a police car? Similarly, your mere presence influences the way children behave. For example, suppose Johnny is off task and chatting away with his friend. An easy way to address this is by your proximity and positioning – casually wonder past his desk, pause and hover nearby for a moment. Johnny will quickly get the hint and be back on task; you

don't even need to make eye contact or say a single word. This strategy requires almost no energy, doesn't interrupt anyone's learning and serves as a cue to remind all other students to stay on task.

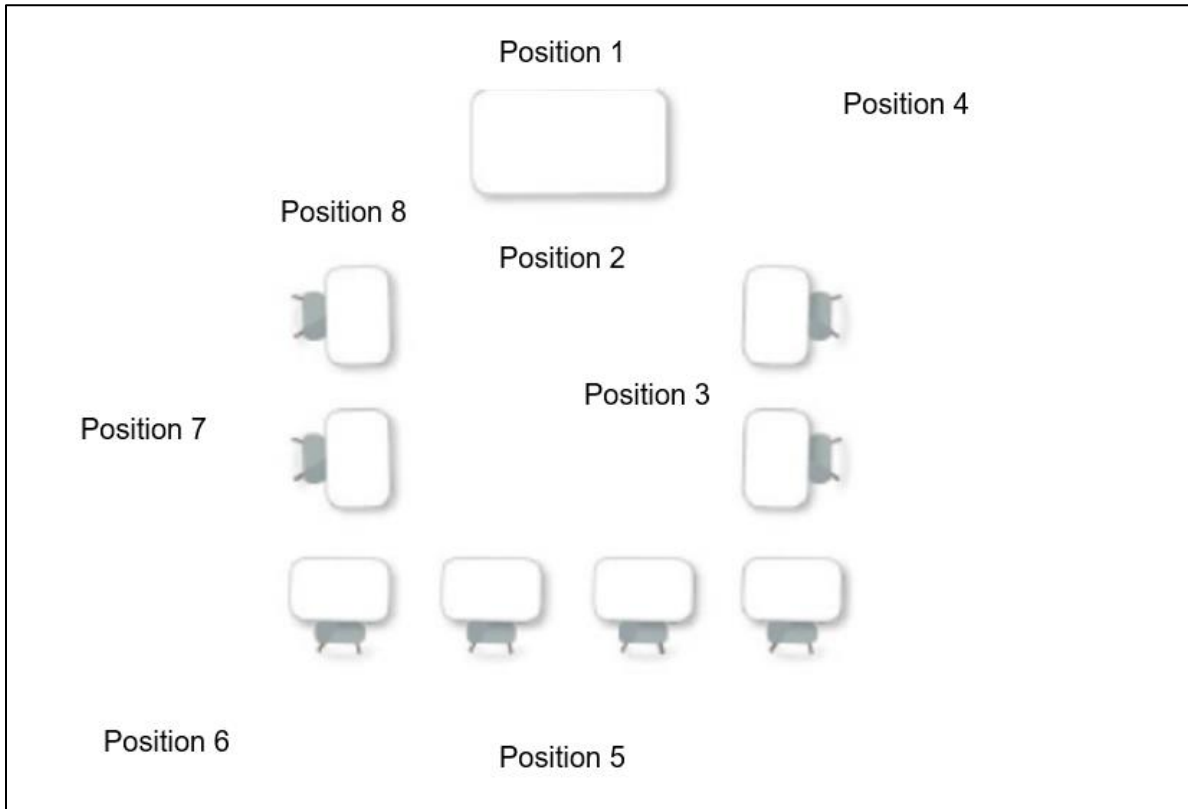


Figure 16. Imagine you're in charge of a small group of 4-8 students for a reading class – where do you position yourself? There are many options, each with various effects and uses. Position 1 is for formal teaching and can be used for a few minutes at the start when you need to use the board. Position 2 is better than position 1 for most activities. Position 3 puts you in the middle of the action and is a good place to start when circulating, although your back is to some students. It does however limit off-task behaviour as you're within a few feet of everyone. Position 4 is for greeting students as they enter and when saying goodbye. Positions 5, 6, and 7 are for supervising from afar (which happens when you want students to learn from each other or work quietly on their own). Position 8 is used to help nearby students while keeping an eye on the group. All positions are temporary, meaning you should not stay in one spot for the whole lesson as that's considered to be lazy teaching.

There are 2 aspects to this strategy: proximity refers to how close (or far away) you are from a student. The closer you are to a student, the more likely your presence will impact their behaviour. Maximum impact is around 60 to 90cm away (e.g., sitting at the desk next to them). Positioning is about choosing the best place to stand and how to get there (known as 'circulating' or 'roving'). Often there is no need to be in close proximity to a student other than to slowly wander past every few minutes. Research suggests that staff should continually move among and around students. This provides a cue that

encourages students to self-manage and monitor their own behaviour – it also makes them more accountable (Englehart, 2013).

Another skill you will need to master is figuring out where to go when activities first begin. Say you are in a challenging class and the teacher has just finished giving instructions for students to work in pairs. Once the teacher has finished talking, where do you go and what do you do? The answer is quite simple: position yourself closest to the students who are most likely to be off task. In fact, this is where you should be standing or crouching while the teacher is giving his or her instructions. Wait a minute or so and then start circling clockwise from pair to pair. You don't need to 'help' each pair, but you can listen for 30 seconds, provide a positive prompt if they are on track, and then move to the next pair.

Ideally, speak to your teacher about what he or she wants you to do beforehand. Also note that if you are allocated a focus student, you will generally work with that student first and foremost (or at least watch him or her closely).

3. Low-key responses



Sometimes a friendly glance is all it takes to get students back on task. Most people who are new to the industry think that the best behaviour management approach is to be assertive or aggressive, however this is not the case. Almost all interactions with students are low-key, friendly and respectful.

Low-key responses (LKR) are the bedrock of behaviour management. You will use them hundreds of times each day, often without even realising. The goal of low-key responses is to get students back on task by using a minimal response (Bennett & Smilanich, 1994). The more minimal the response, the less energy you have to exert to provide it, which adds up when you deliver a few hundred LKR in a day. Other major benefits of LKR include:

- interrupting other students much less
- reducing the chance that the target student will react (which is known as ‘inviting an escalation’).

Hint

LKR have another distinct advantage that you will soon read about – if the student doesn’t respond to a hand signal, you can always ‘up the ante’ and use a few words or approach his/her desk. If that doesn’t work, you can up the ante again and have a chat with the student. You have given him/her 3 opportunities to comply. However, if your first step were to chat with the student and he or she didn’t respond appropriately – what then? You can always start low and go up, but it’s not really possible to start high and then go low.

Proximity is the lowest LKR and it’s highly effective – simply stand or crouch near the target student and he/she will be back on task immediately. If you’re a few metres away, stern eye contact also works (especially with a raised eyebrow). You may not even need a stern look – just eye contact can be enough. Use your eyes and your head to nod in a way that indicates ‘get back on with it’. Simple hand signals are also common. Silently point to the student’s worksheet and mouth ‘thank-you’ at the same time. You could also shake your head and whisper ‘no’ if they are doing something they shouldn’t be doing. These are all low-key responses as they require minimal effort, are delivered quickly and interrupt the fewest number of students.