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TOUGH BLOCK

When it comes to making a difference for especially challenging students, you are your own best resource – **Mark Le Messurier** explains further...

Tough kids. They're the ones whose lives are compromised by the unpredictability of their functioning, or by the capricious nature of their home life, or by both. As a result they find life much tougher than most and in the process make life tougher for those who care for them and educate them. And they comprise a worrying and growing population of students in schools (Russell 2008).

These are the kids we take home in our thoughts most days; complex kids living complex lives, who present us with great challenges. Many, often boys, are inclined to explode and let their hotheaded feelings run away for all to witness. In contrast, there are those who deal with their feelings inwardly, learning to mask feelings of worry, shyness, shame, sadness, isolation, despair or inadequacy. What we often see at school is just the tip of the iceberg; they teeter on the brink of unravelling, imploding or giving up. Sadly, a few quietly slide into anxiety, introversion and depression before our very eyes. Yet, they are also inspiring kids to teach. They compel us to confront what we do and why we do it, and whether our actions are truly helpful.

Unless our response and interventions match the rising complexity and intensity of student needs there will be too many kids from this vulnerable population that will not make it. As many of us have witnessed and experienced, it is too easy to respond abruptly or unhelpfully to the problematic behaviours of the tough kids, and as this happens, these youngsters are quick to absorb the negative messages they hear about themselves. Soon they begin to fulfil a role – the clown, the joker, the victim, the runaway, the avoider, the disrupter, the aggressor or the outsider. They disengage from school and look towards shadow groups who stroke their ego and welcome them. Before they reach high school some say, 'It doesn't matter anyway', 'You can't make me' or 'I don't care'. Their reputation spreads and the beacon of transformation latent in every spirited child begins to dim.

As educators, however, we have the capacity to influence transformation within students. We can fill them with inspiration, dread, dreams, confidence or deep feelings of failure or resentment – and history tells us we are very good at it. So before leaping into grand plans to encourage any student to lift his or her organisation, care, motivation, mood or responsibility, let's review what we have to offer: the depth of our personal resources and our understandings, leading to a few guiding ideas that can help all young learners, tough or otherwise, find success.

YOUR PERSONAL CHECKLIST

TAKE THE CHALLENGE AND REFLECT:

1 DO YOU OFFER RELATIONSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT TO STUDENTS?

Our best work is always done inside relationships with kids because as we truly get to know students the wonderful advantage of being able to read them so much more successfully begins to surface. It becomes easier to gauge changes in their emotions and we begin to know when to pull back and change tack. As relationship strengthens there is the scope to develop privately understood signals that convey vital messages – a look conveying more than a thousand words.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARK LE MESSURIER IS THE AUTHOR OF *TEACHING TOUGH KIDS* (ROUTLEDGE, £24.99), FROM WHICH THIS FEATURE HAS BEEN ADAPTED.

READER OFFER

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2 DO YOU ASK KIDS: 'WHAT WILL HELP' 'WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP YOU?'

When a student's performance is awkward or challenging they are almost always aware of the difficulties too. When asked, a surprising number of kids know what could help and are prepared to trial ways to improve things. Make time to talk and listen. A critical step is to normalise their functioning. Begin by teasing out what they enjoy and what they feel good at. Work to create balance, so interests are rekindled and feelings of success are aroused. Just beginning the day on a positive note can make a big difference – try reading a joke or two to the class and having the kids score the quality of the quips; showing a strange or funny film clip; or introducing a positive saying each day or week to the class.

3 DO YOU LOOK AFTER YOURSELF?

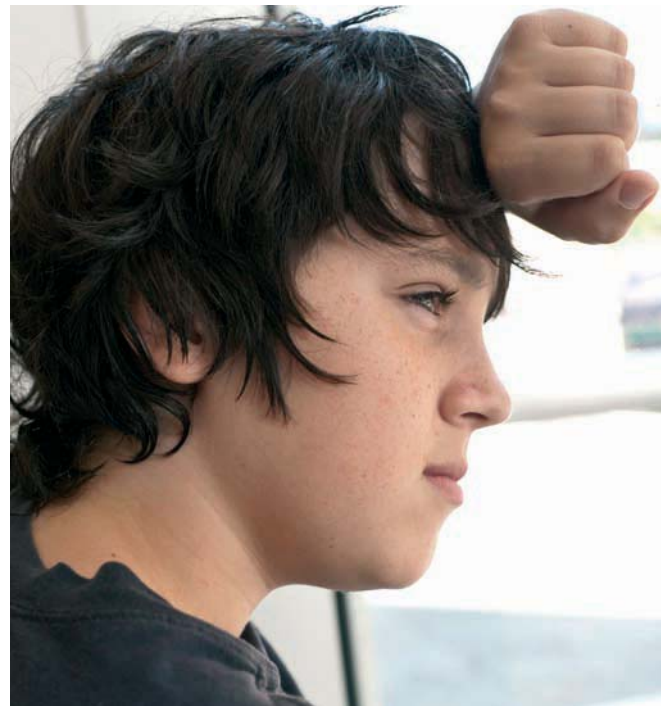
As well as having serious adverse effects on the teachers, stress and burnout can appreciably disadvantage students' growth and learning (Evers et al. 2004). In the absence of winning the lottery, being awarded significant pay rises or having additional support staff here is a plan to keep your life in good balance:

- Never teach alone. Develop a small team or find a buddy to creatively share work with. Plan together and share resources and ideas when you can.
- Arrive at school 15 minutes earlier each day. If you're chasing time, and something has a fifty/fifty chance of going wrong, you can be sure it will!

- Cultivate a group of good friends to have fun with, to complain to about school, and to be caring towards you.
- Recognise what you can and cannot control, what you want to be part of and what you can let go. Many teachers are perfectionists and forget that no one else will ever know when they haven't quite met their goal.
- Learn to say no. It is not unusual to see the highly motivated and committed teachers involved in many aspects of school life; make it a point to understand where your true limits lie and to work to these.
- Always ask for help when you need it.
- Consciously discover the things you can do that will renew your energy and spirit.

53%

THE NUMBER OF TEACHERS IN A RECENT SURVEY WHO ADMITTED 'FEELING AT RISK OF LOSING SELF CONTROL' AS A RESULT OF WITNESSING OR BEING A VICTIM OF POOR BEHAVIOUR BY A PUPIL (SOURCE: RECOURSE.ORG.UK)



the balance of being high on both continua, and work within the restorative quadrant. The length and intensity of our visits to each quadrant is largely governed by our emotional states: moods, motivations, engagement, levels of anxiety or stress, how fresh we feel and so on. Despite these varying emotional factors, each of us has a quadrant that we naturally gravitate to or 'live in' most of the time.

- Do you know which quadrant you 'live in'?
- Do you know why?
- When the pressure is really on, which quadrant do you snap into?
- Does your current style work for you and for your students?

6 DO YOU PROMOTE WHAT YOU DO TO PARENTS?

Teachers frequently say to one another, 'Those parents just don't appreciate what we're doing to help their child.' But, there is more to this puzzle than meets the eye. What usually occurs is that the educators get busy assembling all sorts of flexible supports and interventions for the student, but overlook adequately informing the student's parents about what they have pulled together.

This is the time to parade what we do so well to parents, and immerse them in the process of inclusive educational practice (Forlin et al.2008). A wise starting point is to create a small team who can support the student, one another and implement review meetings, which offer a forum to talk, make adjustments and plan. It can also be uplifting for students to meet with their team from time to time to see and hear their teacher's care and participation.

Teachers are the natural interface between students and parents, and parents often look to educators for emotional steadiness and advice. From time to time they will seek you out to offload irritations and to discover help or hope. At other times you will become caught up in their fury as they defend their child from the indefensible. Avoid taking the moral high ground or absorbing their fiery approach too personally. Reassure them that raising any child is hard work and most parents find themselves out of their depth every so often, but raising a child with a challenge is always tough. Sometimes connecting a troubled parent with a compassionate, level-headed parent who has dealt with similar issues is therapeutic.

4 DO YOU REMIND STUDENTS THEY CAN CHANGE AND GET SMARTER?

We've long known that successful individuals, with or without difficulties, do not find success by accident (Raskind et al. 1999). Success is sparked by a desire, by planning, setting goals, reviewing and persisting. Numerous studies and experts over the years have concluded that the immersion of young people in encouraging environments is what makes the greatest difference (Seligman 2002). Students need to know that from the very beginning the cells in their brains are miraculously organising themselves into networks that communicate with each other, store and process information and learn new things. And, teachers need to know that we're part of this miracle.

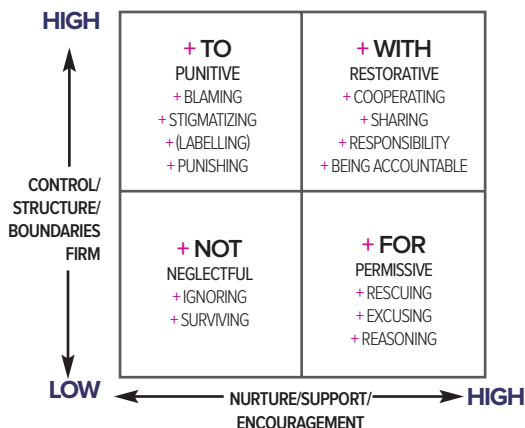
5 HOW DO YOU CONTROL?

Historically teachers have been urged to control the behaviour of their students, and control still remains a crucial classroom element. However, the focus is rapidly shifting away from blatantly demanding it – spitting out emotionally charged phrases as 'you should', 'you must', 'you can't', 'I want', and 'do it now!' – towards looking at the quality of control expected from educators.

It is professionally awakening to reflect on our need to control and how we exercise this. The Social Control Window (below) is a handy tool to help us examine our leadership style: how we work with others, how we use our authority and what our style really looks like. By way of an overview, the vertical axis presents a continuum of firmness, concerning how we set boundaries, clarify expectations, impose limits, hold others accountable and provide structure for those we work or live with.

WHY DO WE DO IT?

For some of the tough kids, school is the only place they receive security and consistent care, and hear the kinds of messages children need to receive. As educators, these youngsters dare us to break away from our comfort zone; to try new ideas. They prevent us from becoming overly complacent. As they take our patience, persistence and endurance to the outer limits they prompt both our personal and professional growth. And, in those moments when something clicks for them, or a few years later when we hear about their success, it reminds us that we are all in this together. They teach us about the value of connectedness and the depth of the human spirit.



The horizontal axis displays the level of nurture, support and encouragement we offer to those within our influence. On good days, most of us manage to strike