

Stop yelling, it doesn't help

By Caroline Milburn
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Yelling at students does not improve their behaviour, according to a study of teachers and their discipline methods, to be released today.

Teacher aggression, such as yelling angrily, and the use of punishments such as class detention, were ineffective in fostering good, responsible behaviour among students, the study found.

Its investigation of classroom behaviour and discipline styles involved more than 4000 students and 600 teachers from 21 government primary schools and 21 secondary schools in north-east Victoria. Classes with well-behaved students had teachers who were less punishment oriented. The teachers were more likely to discuss misbehaviour with their students, involve them in decision-making and recognise and reward good behaviour.

The study's author, Dr Ramon Lewis, of La Trobe University, said teachers who relied more heavily on punishment and rebuking their students to instil discipline might be doing so in reaction to bad student behaviour. However the study found that in all classroom situations, whether students were badly behaved or not, misbehaving students responded better to more inclusive, less aggressive tactics from teachers.

It also found that teachers who relied on aggressive tactics rarely praised or acknowledged an unruly student when they behaved well.

"Many of these difficult kids believe the teacher is playing the man and not the ball and the data from the study supports that," said Dr Lewis, associate professor at La Trobe's school of educational studies. "If any teacher gives them any hint of dislike or rejection they're very quick to pick up on that and their behaviour worsens. It's important for teachers locked in this spiral to recognise that the only behaviour they can control is their own. If they can do that then the child is more likely to co-operate."

The report raised concerns that those teaching irresponsible students were often unwilling to use the types of inclusive discipline methods that students responded to positively. Instead they resorted to greater use of aggressive discipline tactics.

"It is problematic to see an increased use of aggression and punishment, given that they are at best, of limited usefulness and, at worst, counterproductive," said the report, to be released in Adelaide at a conference held by the Australian Council for Educational Research.

Dr Lewis said encouraging teachers to build rather than destroy goodwill with badly behaved students was a difficult task, especially when other recent research found that teachers experiencing discipline problems in classes were unlikely to talk about it with colleagues.

He said it was therefore important for schools to instigate a series of staff workshops to create a code of behaviour for teachers that specified how to implement more effective discipline tactics.

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