

THE AGITATOR

I. BEHAVIOR:

Specific attitudes and actions at home and/or at school.

1. Tries to cause disruptions—and appears delighted with it.
2. Gets others to do or say what they will not do or say.
3. Uproots old controversies, cries “unjust,” incites hostilities, and causes as much conflict as possible.
4. Tries to appear as an innocent bystander in any conflicts caused by them.
5. May act upset, stir others to defiance, and then walk away when the disturbance is about to take place.
6. Usually gets other students into trouble more often than they get into trouble. Typically does not get openly and publicly involved, but operates from the sidelines.
7. At home, hits, pushes, and trips siblings when out of parents’ sight—then says the sibling started it if problems result.
8. Starts rumors to create turmoil.
9. Plays other people against one another, and often provokes physical confrontations between other people.
10. Consistently acts immature and irresponsible.
11. Tattles on and seeks attention from others.
12. Appears to operate without loyalties, even to those regarded as friends.

II. EFFECTS:

How behavior affects teachers, peers, and parents in the school learning environment and at home.

1. Others are influenced to do or say what the agitator would not do or say themselves.
2. Learning environment is disrupted because this behavior distracts everyone from the work or discussion at hand.
3. Social experience of students becomes negative.
4. At times, others are led to admire this student’s sly and manipulative behavior.
5. Teacher can easily start to feel threatened and may fear losing control of the class.
6. Classmates can begin to feel as if they might be able to get away with similar behavior.
7. Class may be in a frequent uproar.
8. Teacher influence and credibility may be reduced, and they may lose self-control.
9. Teacher may feel inadequate. As a result, they can become tense and transmit this tension to the agitating student and other students.

III. ACTION:

- **Identify causes of misbehavior.**
 - **Pinpoint student needs being revealed.**
 - **Employ specific methods, procedures, and techniques for getting the student to modify or change their behavior.**
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1. Primary cause of misbehavior:
 - Power: The need for power is expressed by creating situations that demonstrate the student’s ability to be in control.
2. Primary needs being revealed:
 - Hunger, Thirst, Rest: Lack of food and rest may be a form of abuse and should be investigated.
 - Sex and Sexuality: Because of past experiences, this person may find it very difficult to establish any positive relationships.
 - Escape from Pain: This student protects themselves by the use of power to cover their pain.
3. Secondary needs being revealed:
 - Aggression and Assertion: This student has a need to control and should be helped to find ways to assert themselves positively.
 - Inquisitiveness: This student may have a strong need to know what’s going on. They want to know the *why* behind what we’re doing and what’s going on.
 - Power, Status: This student may be trying to achieve through agitation.
4. Remember that the agitator’s biggest fear is exposure; basically, they are a pretender as well as a coward. The agitator cannot accept the full and open responsibility of a leadership position, but needs others to fulfill their needs.
5. Identify the agitator through these two behaviors: First, they are always present when there is trouble—but appear to be an innocent bystander. Second, they are never personally involved in any dispute, if it can be avoided. Whenever you observe an ever-present innocent bystander, look for the student’s position of leadership in group situations.

6. Indicate tactfully and professionally in a private conference that the disguise has been revealed. This will curtail their activities almost immediately.
7. Be careful not to make an open accusation—they can easily deny involvement.
8. Seriously, but gently, tell the student that you suspect what they are doing. You may add that you have a professional obligation to discuss this deceitful behavior with parents, their other teachers, and administrators.
9. Regardless of the student's response, fear will likely be their primary emotion. Treat this fear kindly.
10. Listen carefully, then show concern. When you do, the agitator will make every effort to improve and to make sure you know that they are trying. Therefore, confront in a caring way.
11. When you confront, use the "What Is More Important Than Why" technique. Don't ask *why* the student did something. The student may not even know they are agitating. Regardless, "why" is not the immediate issue. You can talk about why later. Ask *what* the student did, and what they are going to do about it. You may even skip asking what the student did—and tell them. However, you must ask what the student is going to do about it.
12. Recognize and acknowledge any efforts to improve. Otherwise, the agitating may begin again.
13. Be specific about what kind of behavior you expect.
14. Be sure the agitator knows that you are not going to forget their past actions. Tell the student that you want to support positive behavior, and that anytime you see the slightest indication that they are beginning to agitate again, you will confront them about it and stop it immediately.
15. Assign special duties to this student—such as passing out papers, erasing boards, etc. This helps meet the need for attention and power.
16. Use peer pressure in sincere and straightforward ways to help motivate this student to change the behavior. This is easily done by appointing the agitator to a leadership position. Remember, this student wants influence but not responsibility. Yet, responsibility is what will change the behavior.
17. Set up a contract with the student. Make explicit agreements about what should be done, when and where it should be done, and how it should be done.
18. Try to remain objective and emotionally neutral. Remember, the student who resists authority knows where the power is, yet has chosen a course that they know risks severe consequences. Such resistance says everything from "I don't understand" to "I don't know what to do but fight."
19. Rather than fearing this student's agitating behavior or being appalled, look at it as an opportunity to help a student work through a problem that can only cause trouble for them. Begin by showing your willingness to listen and talk privately.
20. Fully understand that behind every student rejection of your efforts is an overwhelming feeling of failure or frustration. That's why teaching rather than forcing is the best course to take. Any other road leads toward a destructive kind of confrontation and puts you on the same level as the distressed student. This should not be a road we choose just to prove our power.

IV. MISTAKES:

Common misjudgments and errors in managing the student that may perpetuate or intensify the problem.

1. Openly and publicly accusing certain students of being agitators.
2. Failing to see the real fear of being discovered that underlies this student's behavior.
3. Believing this behavior is directed toward us personally and reacting as such to the student and the behavior.
4. Getting into an argument, thereby causing division among the class.
5. Issuing punishments to the group, thus triggering strong student reactions.
6. Assuming that the agitator is responsible for a particular situation based on past history.
7. Overreacting to all incidents of criticism and calling them agitation.
8. Making threats to stop the behavior and backing ourselves into a corner.
9. Becoming involved in a power play or feeling that "I must have the last word if I am to be the winner."
10. Openly confronting the student in class. This can only cause trouble for all, and we may lose respect.
11. Accusing a student too harshly and/or in the presence of class members.
12. Playing detective and acting unfairly when we aren't able to pinpoint the culprit.
13. Attacking the followers rather than confronting the agitator.

SEE ALSO:

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| • The Angry | • The Bully | • The Defier |
| • The Influencer | • The Jealous | • The Malcontent |
| • The Overly Aggressive | | |