

# Behaviour Management Episode 5: Planning for positive behaviour

Rebecca Vukovic

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*Hello and thank you for downloading this Behaviour Management podcast from Teacher magazine. I'm Rebecca Vukovic. And just a reminder, you can subscribe to our podcast channels on both [iTunes](#) and [SoundCloud](#) by clicking on the links in the transcript for this podcast.*

*My guest today is Dr Jeff Thomas, a lecturer in the Master of Teaching and Graduate Certificate of Education at the University of Tasmania. Jeff's research and teaching interests include the relationship between engagement and classroom behaviour, and reengagement approaches for disengaged students.*

*With the start of the school year fast approaching here in Australia, many teachers will be busy preparing for those first, initial weeks in the classroom. And according to Jeff, the beginning of the year is an amazing opportunity to engage students, to build relationships and to establish explicit expectations around student behaviour. But, he says, it's important to plan for positive behaviour.*

*Our discussion today covers many different areas including how to plan for that positive behaviour in your classroom, which routines are critical to establish in the initial weeks of the year, and practical things to keep in mind when responding to particularly challenging behaviours as they arise in class. Before we launch into the discussion though, I ask Jeff to give listeners a brief overview of his career as an educator working in schools, and more insight into the work he does now at the university. Here's Jeff.*

Jeff Thomas: Yeah thanks Rebecca. I was a teacher for around 12 years, mainly in secondary schools both here in Australia and a bit of time overseas as well. And I had the opportunity to work in both high and quite low socioeconomic schools, so I had quite a diverse teaching career, mainly specialising in Maths, Science and Outdoor Education. But then in the last part of my career, I started specialising or working specifically with students who were disengaged from education, who would have been leaving the school system and just focusing on them, and that really gave me an insight into, or an interest into, looking at the reasons behind disengagement and some of the things that can help reengage as well. And that led onto my career into the university where I now work with the Master of Teaching students, talking about engagement and how to plan for positive behaviour, as well as more specific units in terms of reengagement – that high end, pointy-end student stuff.

**Rebecca Vukovic: Fantastic. And so Jeff, at the very beginning of any school year, what are some things teachers can do to plan for positive behaviour in their classroom?**

JT: Yeah great question. And I hope that any teacher who's listening to this has had an absolutely wonderful break and recharged their batteries because the start of the year is always so intense. I think it's really important – before we get into some of the practical strategies – to remember that when we talk about behaviour, we're talking about all the different ways that students act, all the things that they do in our classrooms and at school. Sometimes we just use it euphemistically as meaning to be disruptive, 'a behaviour student', but when we can understand that how a student acts is a response to how well they're engaged with school, it really gives us a fantastic insight and helps us plan for what we can do. So if a student feels like they belong in school, if they feel that there's a purpose in them being there, and it's an enjoyable place to be, then we'll see that in their behaviour. They'll want to be there and they'll turn up and they'll participate. Conversely, if they feel that school isn't a place for them or they're bored, they can't see the point of going to school or they feel unsafe, then we'll see that in their behaviour too. So I think this idea of planning for positive behaviour is really important – so they're going to behave, it's just what sort of behaviour.

And at the beginning of the year we have an amazing opportunity, because most of our students turn up on day one willing to give school, you know, every chance of having a fantastic, positive experience and the [idea]

of a fresh start almost regardless of what's happened in the past. So before the start of the year, those key factors about affective engagement (so students having a high sense of belonging in their classroom) and also cognitive engagement (so really excited about what they're going to learn) are our two outcomes that we need to be planning for. So I would encourage everybody to have in the forefront on their mind when they're planning for positive behaviour. That's going to look different in different contexts. For a primary school context, for example, you might have displays organised that explicitly state 'this is our classroom' and have photos of all the students and all their names, they might be on their desks or they might be on a wall display. I particularly love the wall displays in some of the primary classrooms that I've seen where the photos of each student are on puzzle pieces, jigsaw pieces, and they all interlock together – so the message is that we're all part of this interconnected class and we're all part of this. In a secondary class that might be a bit more subtle. You might not want to have kids' photos up on puzzle pieces, but it might be a pre-prepared exhibition space, for example, where again, the student walks into that space and they can see already that the teacher has identified them as an individual and this is their place. They're not just a number on a page.

Additionally, and again I know that all the teachers listening to this will know the importance of learning names. I can't overstate this enough that by students knowing that you know their name, it's the easiest way, the most obvious way that we can send that message that I've seen you, I've seen you as a person and I care about you – even if I don't know you very well, yet. So whatever strategy the teacher can use to try and learn names as quickly as possible, I would highly, highly recommend that. And my rule of thumb for that 'quickly as possible' bit is that primary school teachers or if you're only responsible for one class, you really should be able to nail their names by the end of their first day. And for secondary teachers, if you're only seeing them three times a week, give yourself a week before you know their names (because it's pretty tricky when you've got five or six classes).

The other thing you can do before the start of the year is think about how the room is going to look, physically. And so everything to do with the room is an interaction, so it's how the students are going to experience and feel about being at school. So when they see the desk set up for example, if it's really well organised and it's very clear that the teacher has put a lot of effort into thinking how this classroom is going to work for their class, that will send a particular message. It will send a message if the desks are in a circle for example, that we're a whole class and we're going to be working together. If they're in small, inquiry group tables set up, then again that's going to send a message about the type of learning that's going to happen and get the kids really excited about that. To think about the flipside of that as well, that if the student walks into the room and there's blank walls and the desks are stacked against the corridor wall, then students will probably get that subtle message that the effort hasn't been put in – and there might be lots of valid reasons for that, but it's trying to send those immediate messages that when the student walks in, they've been thought about and they've been cared for.

And then planning for that first day as well. Again, you really want to get the students walking away excited. Excited about learning. Because ultimately, even though we try to do heaps of other stuff in schools, it's a place for teaching and learning. So how can you plan those first interactions with the students so they come away absolutely buzzing about how exciting the year is going to be? That could be games, activities, or perhaps discussions or mind maps or brainstorming about the sorts of things that the kids want to do. It might be things that happen each year – like a class camp or an excursion – that the students have heard about from other year groups, that now you can really start to get them excited about and starting to plan. Anything that's going to get them walking out of the class, really excited about coming back the next day. And again, often we (particularly in a secondary situation and that's my main experience) often that first day we'll say, 'we'll just get them to fill in some forms and put their names on books' – that doesn't get them excited about learning, we need to do something that's going to hook them in.

**RV: And a lot of work in the initial weeks of any school year is about establishing expectations and routines. So in your experience, what are some of the most critical routines that should be established right at the beginning of the school year?**

JT: Yeah great question and I think it's really, really important Rebecca. Any teacher who's working in a classroom knows that the classroom expectations and routines really set the scene for the rest of the year. And so it's worth putting in the time and the effort to get them right. There are a few reasons for that and I think one of the main ones is because the communication or what the teacher wants to communicate around what is acceptable behaviour or responsible or respectable behaviour in their classroom has to be really clearly communicated between them and the students. Because sometimes we fall into this trap as teachers that we say an expectation or we try to talk about an expectation which might be a bit vague or could be misinterpreted and we assume that students know what we mean. So we say 'in our classroom we must always be polite' for example, or organised, or 'we always should always use good manners'. And sometimes it's easy

to forget that for some students, they have very different ideas or experience or history of what being polite or organised or having good manners might be. So when we're talking about expectations, whatever they happen to be in your classroom, I would say be very specific about them. Rather than saying 'good manners' we should say 'we put our hands up before answering a question' (for example) and we should model that behaviour – the teacher should be demonstrating exactly what they mean by that – and we should be practicing it. Too often, we get off on the wrong foot with students when we expect a certain behaviour without really teaching it, explicitly teaching what we mean by that. So whatever it happens to be, whatever expectation it is, we need to practice and need to model it and give the students a really good opportunity to learn it.

So some of the more specific things to talk about, I guess. One is the routines of how the class is likely to work and I think anything that creates that sense of order and predictability in the classroom is super important. So structure and predictability promote a sense of security in the class and this is important I think for everyone, we all like to know, children and adults alike, like to know what's happening next. We want to know when our next pay cheque is coming, for example, we don't want it to come as a surprise, or not. We want to know what's happening. And it gives us a sense of security and safety. I should add as well, that that's particularly important for students whose home lives or out-of-school lives might be particularly unstable. So if they're coming from a traumatic background or a difficult home life, then school being very safe and secure and predictable is really, really important. So, all the things that can cause that chaos at school, and we all know that chaos – it's times of movement and it's times of change or transition. So how students enter the room, you should devise a routine around that, and as I said before we need to practice that and we need to model that. Whether it be lining up outside the classroom or going straight to the mat or whatever it happens to be in your context, you teach it, you practice it half a dozen times, everyone knows what to do and then you congratulate when they get it right on the next day.

Where to sit, what to do when called for attention – so whether it might be a non-verbal signal, so the teacher putting up their hand or moving to a particular spot in the room, or a bell perhaps, what do you actually expect the student to do when you do that? And practice it, rehearse it and get it right. What to do with mobile phones, or if a student needs to leave class or comes in class late can be really crucial points, particularly in the later years with older students. Again, because what the child sees as completely acceptable might be very different to what the class teacher sees as acceptable use of mobile phones, for example. Let's not guess. Let's make it really explicit and say 'this is what we do here' – there's a box at the front, you come in, you put your phone there, you take it out at the end. No problem. Let's practice that. Everyone put your phones at the front and then let's go. If you need to come into the class late, we'd love you to come in, don't worry at all, we want you here, I don't want you to wait outside the room. But just quickly come in, be quiet, and wait until I've finished talking and I'll come over to you. You explain these things really, really clearly and practice them.

I think it's also really important, again, for all ages but it will look different in different contexts, that there's a routine or a procedure or an understanding of what students need to do when they need additional support. So when do they come to you as the teacher? When do they need to perhaps have some help with their own emotional regulation strategies? There might be a mindfulness area in the classroom, for example. For older students it might be opportunities for mentorship with either other staff members or older Year 12 students or prefects or whatever it happens to be. When and how to see the school counsellor, the social worker, whatever your school happens to set up. But really trying to put in those safety nets and again teaching them, making it explicit, there's no stigma attached. These are the levels of support that we are here, fighting for you.

The last thing I have to say about expectations is that I think it's really important that there's a reason behind them and that the teacher can explain that reason clearly and in a way that makes sense to the students of why there is that expectation in your class. And that's going to be different, again for different contexts. But, for example primary school situation, expectations around how to communicate, we can make links between that and the outside world. So we don't want to be seen as rude by interrupting people, so this is how we can learn to do that, we're going to put up our hand or to say 'excuse me' and then we're going to wait. So we can teach those expectations of how to talk or how to be in a conversation by making the links with 'real life' (I know school is real life). And then the same with older students as well. Again, a really easy way to make the expectations reasonable and acceptable to students is to explain and choose expectations, for that matter, that are similar to those in a workplace. So a lot of them will have part-time jobs already and ask them 'what would happen if you turned up late to your part-time job?'. 'What would you need to do so you didn't lose your job?'. 'How would you need to be presented? What would you need to do in terms of presenting a particular standard of work, for example? Or accessing support?'. So by making them real, rather than arbitrary or only school specific, I think it's much more powerful.

**RV: And Jeff, while it's important to plan for positive behaviour in the classroom, it seems inevitable that things won't necessarily always go to plan. So what are some things teachers**

## **should keep in mind when responding to particularly challenging behaviour in the classroom?**

JT: You're absolutely right – all the best laid plans are only that, and all we can do is plan the best way we can do, and then be ready for when things don't go perfectly. I think before I get into that really highly challenging behaviour stuff that you mentioned there, it's important to remember (and the research shows this several times), that the most common problematic behaviour and the harder stuff to deal with are those behaviours resulting from disengagement – so, resulting from kids being bored, interruption in class, it's the calling out, it's the not being prepared – all of those sorts of behaviours are really what we're dealing with as teachers all the time, day to day. So for those behaviours which I call disengaged behaviours, we always have to come back to that idea that if we want to reduce the disengaged behaviours, we need to focus on increasing engagement. So any strategy you choose to use, or our school chooses to use, has to be something which increases how a student feels about the school (so they feel more positively about being there) or how they think about themselves as a student (so they feel better about learning). Which is why, and I haven't said this explicitly yet I don't think, it's why punishments don't work and we know this now. The research is in, we don't need to debate this anymore, but punitive measures don't reduce problematic behaviour. They further increase disengagement. And there's quite a lot of evidence now showing that particularly the high level punitive responses like suspensions and expulsion actually increase problematic behaviour, they don't help stuff.

So, that said, we're still going to have that high level behaviour that we're going to have to deal with and that's life. But I just wanted to make sure that everyone keeps that in perspective because it's the thing that we fear the most that actually happens the least. The high level, aggressive, very challenging behaviour is the exception. And it's the exception because it's very rare, and it's also the exception because I would suggest it's not going to be the result of disengagement, it might not be anything to do with what's happening within your class or within your teaching. I think that's really important to remember. Because if we want to help and support that student by how we respond to that really challenging behaviour, we have to try and understand what the source of that is.

So students from a trauma background, for example, who perhaps have a dysregulated response to stimulus, or those living with an emotional or behavioural disorder, they might act in a particular way which is very hard for a teacher to deal with in class. It might be aggressive, it might be towards you or to towards other students, it might be very disruptive. However, again, how we deal with that is not necessarily going to be around making our classes more interesting or more enjoyable, it's going to be something much more complex than that because their conditions are more complex. So my advice in that situation is to build a case team, a support team around that student. So the parents will probably be the people who know the student the best, bring them in, get their advice. Their previous teachers will have some excellent advice, mental health specialists, case workers – a lot of this you can do before the start of the year because these children will be 'flagged' as having previous issues. And I'd argue as well that you'd want to get the child, as appropriate depending on age, in that conversation as well. 'What works for you? When do you feel threatened or angry at school? When do you feel safe? Who do you feel safe with?'. Try and get them involved and be as a team together, working against problematic behaviour.

So one other thing I'd just wanted to add with that is as well Rebecca, is that if we keep it really clear that those high level challenging behaviours are probably not to do with disengagement, we can still call it disengagement for those students in terms of how we respond. So we have to be really careful, I think, in terms of our responses to those high level behaviours. For example, if a student has experienced trauma and so has a very heightened fight or flight response, and something sets them off and they scream at you and then bolt from the room. If we then corner them in the room and shout at them in front of their peers and then send them on suspension, when they come back to our class, they're still going to have the trauma affected brain that they had beforehand, they're still going to have the heightened fight or flight response. As well as that, they're also now not going to feel like school is a safe place, they're not going to feel that you are a trusted adult. And so we'd actually expect then that her behaviour in that situation would get more problematic, because now she's not trauma affected and disengaged. So I think it's really important to try and separate those two types of behaviours.

## **RV: So Jeff finally, how do positive interpersonal relationships between the teacher and students impact behaviour in the classroom?**

JT: A lot. It's no surprise that the three most important factors in classroom behaviour are relationships, relationships and relationships. And we know this through research, we know this through practice. So never underestimate this. The thing I would like to add to that though is by relationships, I don't mean you have to be the student's best friend. So the teacher/student relationship is, I would argue, absolutely crucial and quite unique because the teacher is that main interface, it's the main way that the student is going to interact with school, with education, and if that's positive, then the chances of the student having a positive relationship

with education are much higher. And so those interactions that the teacher and student need to have together really need to reinforce the idea that school is a good place to be and through that relationship, the teacher can send these messages to the students. Things like 'I am valued as a person', 'the teacher actually sees me as an individual', 'I have a place in this class'. So many of our kids feel lonely, they feel isolated, they feel excluded, and the teacher has that responsibility, through their relationship I think, to say 'actually you have a seat here and you'll always have a seat here in my class. There might be some issues that we need to deal with but you always belong here'.

Another message that's super important is the student needs to receive the idea that they can achieve the work given to them. They're not stupid, they can do it and the support is there for them. And there's a point in doing the work, there's value in there. When we give students work that *we* know is going to be really important for their future learning or their future job prospect, it's so important that the student knows that as well. 'There is a reason for me being here'. And the student needs to know that adults will listen to them and respect them as people and it's going to make a massive difference. And so the teacher is the main sender of these messages and sometimes we need to make that really, really explicit. We need to be able to say 'I have devoted my life to becoming your teacher. I care about you. I'm here because of you. I'm not here of the holidays, I'm not here because of the fantastic pay and kudos I get for being a teacher, it's because I care about students, I care about you and I care about your learning'. And I think if we're sending that message to students, then we've done everything we can do to plan for positive behaviour.

*That's all for this episode. To keep listening or to download any of the podcasts in our archive, just visit [acer.ac/teacheritunes](http://acer.ac/teacheritunes) or [soundcloud.com/teacher-acer](http://soundcloud.com/teacher-acer). The full transcript of this podcast is available at [teachermagazine.com.au](http://teachermagazine.com.au). That's where you'll also find links to subscribe to our podcast channels on iTunes and SoundCloud, or to [our email bulletin](#), so you never miss a story.*

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