Removing The Thorns From The Thorn-In-The-Side Student

News

A parent/teacher writes: Each year I have at least one student in my fifth grade class who sits in judgment of my every decision, ready to protest perceived injustices and hold me accountable to their standards. Not only is this disruptive and frustrating to my teaching, but my own home is affected by the same behaviors in our 11 year old son. Any suggestions on how to effectively respond other than my standard threats of punishment?

Each child approaches the classroom through a variety of perceptual lenses. Some view the academic demands in sharpest detail, minimizing the social and personal aspects of the environment. Others can’t seem to screen out the social scene. They look to classmates to showcase their sense of humor, or may inhibit their participation due to fear of peer sanctions. Personality factors cloud the perspective of students who narrowly view the classroom through the lens of fairness and equality. The “big picture” doesn’t occur to them; social context, hidden teacher intentions and boundaries are disregarded if an injustice is perceived.

Teachers are not enamored with students who practice injustice collecting. Typically, protests drain teachers’ patience, further deepening the child’s view of the teacher as mean and unfair. Bitterness on both sides is the result. Here are some coaching strategies that might help smooth over this thorny issue.

Consider the mindset behind the protests. Believe it or not, but headstrong students often perceive teachers’ decisions as disrespectful to them and therefore feel justified to return the treatment. Disrespect may be interpreted in the form of teacher favoritism, rule enforcement, or even forgetfulness. Each time a teacher errs, in their mind, it may be grounds for a verbal challenge. Deep down they may be acting out unresolved feelings with a parent or sibling but unaware of any of those foundation issues. However, the strength of their emotions surrounding classroom decisions makes it clear that there is more going on than just their response to a teacher decision.

Privately conference with the student about the best way to air complaints. These students respond best to one-to-one discussions where teachers do not trigger the tripwire of disrespect.

Talk about hypothetical examples of how teachers must maintain boundaries in the classroom in order for learning to occur. Discuss appropriate times to address personal disagreements over decisions, such as during homeroom or at the end of the day at the teacher’s desk. Stress how you admire their willingness to speak up for themselves but would like for them to work on tact and timing. Give examples of how they might have brought up past issues in a more appropriate way and received a far more “respectful” response from you. Suggest the two of you “clear the slate” of past bad vibes and start anew with these ideas.

Caution the student about the social costs of moaning and groaning. Students who fit this profile can easily get tagged by peers with labels such as difficult, hot head, or complainer. Social ostracism can result. When teachers observe evidence of this development, sensitively point it out to the student. Describe how important it is to keep the “big picture” in mind before expressing oneself. Explain how “big picture thinking” considers how they appear to others before speaking aloud their thoughts or places brakes upon the impulse to jump to conclusions because they may not have all the facts.

If possible, offer them an example of where their expressed belief was off base or where they waged a classroom argument that cost them respect in the minds of classmates.

Ensure that parents are aware of these troubles so that everyone is on the “same page.” Children who protest against injustices often do so at home and other places that lend themselves to “fairness measuring.” Parents should be asked to speak to the child about these tendencies. Some parents unwittingly accommodate to the problem, giving their child a false sense of security with challenging adults in error. Encourage parents to firmly speak to the child about these issues and be prepared not to indulge the child’s habit of debating the decisions of family life. It’s completely appropriate to expect children to accept many parental judgments without the need for cross examination. Instead of allowing debate, parents should focus upon the child’s problem of protesting too much.