

Familiarity Breeds Contempt

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There's no doubt that the 6 questions of our self-control checklist are a powerful way to get children to take stock of their behaviour.

Our posters of the 6 questions have been well received and feedback confirms their effectiveness as classroom reminders for students and teachers.

Designed to shift children from a feeling state to a thinking state by asking them to select an answer from two possibilities, the 6 questions keep things simple. They give children a quick understanding of where they're at and what they need to do to improve things. However, like all good things the 6 questions and The Game Factory language in general can be over used and misused.

The most common problem is over use. Recognising the immediate impact of the language, teachers employ it to address all behaviour, from the most minor slips to complete and disastrous falls from grace. By so doing, the language simply becomes a habit of the teacher's and falls into the easy to ignore background sound of a classroom.

The questions are asked without real intent and frequently prompt a, "here she/he goes again" attitude from students. Instead of triggering a reflective response, the questions can become another boring element in a teacher's tool box of classroom management techniques.

When answering questions that have been asked too many times and with too little validity, students often answer correctly but with the sub text of, "please just shut up – you are so boring." Students convey this message by unduly extending the length of the answer.

Marcus is balancing a pencil on his finger instead of reading his book.

Teacher: Marcus, strong decision or weak decision?

Marcus: *(Hears the teacher but tempts the teacher into being even more boring by repeating the question)* What?

Teacher: *(Answers with more than a hint of tedium in his/her voice)* Weak decision or strong decision?

Marcus: *(Knows what they are referring to but intends to prove the teachers predictability and confirm for the whole class just how boring they are. He looks perplexed).* I don't know what you mean.

Teacher: You're playing with your pencil when you're meant to be reading.

Marcus: *(With feigned ignorance).* Yeah?

Teacher: *(With a rising annoyance).* Well, do you think that's a weak decision or strong decision?

Marcus: *(In a loud resentful voice infused with frustration).* Itt'ss aaaa weeeaaak deecission!
(subtext – "and you are so boring!")

The class hearing the subtext sniggers and laughs.

Teacher: *(Annoyed)* Then make a strong decision please and read your book!

Marcus: It's boring!

It's important that teachers use the questions judiciously. Selecting the right and best moment to ask one or indeed all of the key questions helps maintain their significance, impact and effectiveness.

Having the questions at a teacher's disposal does not mean they should abandon all the other techniques that are effective at getting children back on task and doing the right thing. A cautionary look, a change of position, a simple calling of a student's name, a general request to keep working, a smile and an encouraging nod, a point, a whisper in an ear, standing close to, a tap on the desk, a reminder of the time left etc., etc. are all ways that teachers use to keep classrooms productive. These should remain as the mainstay of a teacher's technique, thereby keeping the 6 questions at the high-end of effectiveness.

Rote responses from students indicate over use of the questions. If this is happening, deliberately scale back and try asking the questions only when absolutely necessary.

The following scenarios are alternatives worth trying:

One

Teacher: Marcus, are you doing the right thing or wrong thing? (*before Marcus can answer the teacher quickly continues*). Don't answer that. Just think about it and take charge of your behaviour please.

Two

Teacher: Marcus, would you please look at the list of questions and ask yourself the one that would help the most to get you back on track.

Three

Teacher: Your answer was too quick and thrown away, Marcus. However, it was correct. That's good. Now, it will be even better if you follow through and do what is necessary.

Four

Teacher: I'm sure you're aware of what you're meant to be doing and I'm sure you know the self-control question I'm trying not to ask. I think we will have both done well if I don't ask it and you just do it.

The objective is to have children asking the questions of themselves and each other.

Understanding, owning and using the language is empowerment. If teachers use it too much their students will use it too little.

Teachers can improve usage by encouraging students to support class members who are off task by speaking to them and using questions from the self-control checklist.

It's worth remembering that teachers often say too much, too often and too loudly. Holding back creates the opportunity for children to speak to themselves, assist others and make a habit of self-monitoring and management.

Following closely behind over use is misuse.

The power of the 6 questions lies in the fact that as questions they prompt self-reflection. Turn them into statements and they smack of judgement and fail to trigger the self-reflection that leads to self-control.

The questions were never intended to be used as a big stick to coerce children into doing the right thing. They are meant to be delivered by a teacher who is in control of their emotions. A teacher who is behaving like an adult with a distinct and identifiable desire to help the child.

The pressures and stresses of a classroom can all too easily have a teacher converting the questions to damaging and inflammatory statements. The questions must never be used brutally or with harshness. Harshness and brutality are the weapons of those who believe themselves to be superior. They are the tools of judgement and condemnation.

EXAMPLES OF MISUSE – Usually delivered in the attacking tones of annoyance, frustration or anger.

- You're having a weak moment.
- You're feelings are in charge.
- What you are doing is so wrong.
- Sit out of the game until your thinking is in control.
- You're doing the wrong thing and running away from the problem.
- Can't you be strong?
- Do you think that's strong?
- You're a victim.
- Be the master of your feelings.
- Try being your own boss.
- Can't you see I'm trying to help you?
- That's weak.
- Be strong and stop running from the problem.
- You know that's wrong.

An effective strategy to help students own the language and to promote an obligation on the part of every student to help their classmates, is to share the questions around.

SCENARIO:

Marcus has left his desk and wandered to the window.

Teacher: Marcus, do you know why you're standing at the window?

Marcus: Because I want to.

Teacher: Ahh, there's that feelings word, "want." Tell me, is it more enjoyable to be looking out the window than sitting at your desk and working?

Marcus: Yes.

Teacher: Well of course it is. I'm sure that anyone standing at the window would agree with you. However, even though it's enjoyable at the window is it the right thing to do right now?

Marcus: No.

Teacher: See how you know that. Tammy, just because something feels good does that make it the right thing to do?

Tammy: No.

Teacher: John, if your feelings are in charge will you most likely be doing the right thing or the wrong thing?

John: Wrong thing.

Teacher: Which explains why you're at the window, Marcus. Now, to take yourself back to your chair what will you need to use, feelings or thinking?

Marcus: Thinking.

Teacher: Thinking. And it won't be easy because at your table is work you're not enjoying. But if Marcus can take himself back to his chair, will that be a strong or weak thing to do, Richard?

Richard: A strong thing.

Teacher: And are you Richard making a weak or strong decision by staying at your table and working away at something I know you don't like and find difficult?

Richard: A strong decision.

Teacher: In fact Richard, I'd say a very strong decision. If Marcus makes a strong decision and goes back to his desk by himself, am I being his boss or is Marcus being his own boss, Andy?

Andy: He is being his own boss.

Teacher: And would that make him a master or a victim of his feelings, Tammy?

Tammy: A master.

Teacher: Correct Tammy. Please believe me Marcus, when I say I know you don't like the work we are doing right now. And please understand that you are not alone – others don't like the work either. Is returning to your chair the right thing or wrong thing to do, Marcus?

Marcus: The right thing.

Teacher: Then would you do that please? Thank you.

Of course, the teacher could have simply given Marcus a disapproving look with a firm request for him to return to his chair and achieved the same physical outcome. This would have saved some time and may have been the better strategy – but then again, it may not have been.

Selecting the best strategy is up to the teacher. If behaviour education is the objective, then seize teachable moments to do that and if there are other more pressing objectives then do what is necessary to achieve those. However the rule of thumb is to avoid saying too much, too often, too loudly.

A common mistake when sharing the questions around is creating a situation where the class answers the questions as a group, in a manner that denigrates or demeans the student who has transgressed.

Example:

Teacher: Boys and girls, is Marcus doing the right thing or wrong thing?

Class: *(They shout in hostile unison)* Wrong thing.

Teacher: Is he being strong or weak?

Class: *(They respond loudly with the intent to put Marcus down)* Weak.

Teacher: Is he a master or victim?

Class: *(With denigrating laughter)* A victim.

Teacher: Will I have to be his boss?

Class: *(With cruel pleasure)* Yes.

This use of the mass to dominate the individual can be crushing for some and is hurtful for all. It's an abuse of the questioning process and gives students permission to demean their peers as the means to support the teacher.

There are times when using a mass response is helpful and they are most likely to be when a teacher wants to acknowledge something positive about a student's behaviour.

The self-control check list of 6 questions is a powerful tool and used with care it can and does help children to reflect and take charge of their behaviour.

Over used, misused and abused, it will fail to achieve its purpose through no fault of its own.