

# feelings:

## teaching young students how to describe their emotions

By Gabriel I. Lomas

*Naming and describing emotions can be difficult at any age. Here the author notes how he helped teachers approach the subject of emotions with their very young deaf students.*

One of the critical functions of my job as counselor for a local program for deaf students is to support teachers in eliciting appropriate behavior from students in the classroom. Sometimes this is done formally when I sit with a teacher and review documentation of behavior. Other times, I provide support as the behavior is occurring. For example, one day I walked down a hall toward a classroom with deaf children. I could hear crying, and I saw a student sitting by the door of his kindergarten classroom. I walked up and attempted to engage the student in conversation. When I asked him how he was feeling, he signed he was happy. I was shocked! The only feeling the crying student could name was *happy*.

I realized that our students were not learning the words for describing feelings that hearing students learn casually from their parents, family, and environment. I began to ask the students I saw in group counseling to identify their feelings. The secondary students could identify most basic feelings, but they couldn't verbalize their feelings as well as their hearing peers. Many of the elementary students could name only *happy* and *sad*. For the rest of the school year, I focused my counseling groups on feelings. We dramatized feelings in skits, drew pictures of them on paper, and talked about them. Further, I asked all teachers at the elementary level to teach lessons about feelings. It wasn't long before we began to see improvement in student behavior.

*Photography courtesy of Gabriel I. Lomas*





**Gabriel I. Lomas,** MA, PhD candidate in counselor education, is the former counselor for the Brazoria-Fort Bend Educational Program for the Deaf in suburban Houston, Texas, and a current instructor of counseling at the University of Houston-Clear Lake.

### The Importance of Managing Classroom Behavior

Teaching feelings to deaf children is only one need that teachers must keep in mind as they prepare for a new school year. However, teachers should put as much forethought into classroom management as they do into their curriculum. According to Wong and Wong (1998), the most important factor in student learning is classroom management. In other words, how a classroom is managed determines how well its students learn.

*Here are some things that teachers can do to promote appropriate behavior:*

- **Plan ahead.** A well-run class is no accident.
- **Keep good structure from start to finish.** Down time allows students to get off task. Minimize down time and be sure students are busy from the moment they walk into your room until they leave.
- **Create and post rules with students on the first day of school.** Rules should be few,

easy to understand, and visible. Consequences for infractions should also be posted.

- **Catch students being good.** This improves rapport and gives them hope, making them believe you see them in a positive light. Hope is essential for good behavior; a hopeless child has no reason to behave.
- **Document behavior.** The most powerful tool to have when meeting with staff and parents is a log that documents students' behavior. At minimum, write down what was done, when it was done, and how you responded.
- **Never engage in power struggles.** When a teacher and student argue, no one wins.
- **Be consistent and stick to your plan.** Don't give up when things don't go well. Be sure your room is predictable; surprises for students may lead to undesirable behavior.

The tips listed above are a few of the most important keys to behavior management for all teachers. Being proactive about behavior

should help reduce the amount of time you spend reacting to outbursts. However, deaf children have unique needs. To address their unique needs, follow these tips:

Teach feelings vocabulary to your deaf students throughout the school year. Their ability to identify their feelings allows them to move from using behavior to tell you how they feel to using language for self-expression. Begin with the basics—comfortable feelings, such as happy, excited, proud, and silly, and uncomfortable feelings, such as sad, angry, disappointed, and ashamed.

Examine your response to students. Don't be afraid to admit mistakes. Students must know that you also are human and make mistakes. At the same time, remember you are their model for language and self-management. Respond to misbehavior in a way that maintains dignity and keeps you and your students in control, avoiding escalation of behavior.

Keep lessons exciting. Deaf children need lessons that are visual and kinesthetic. Active instead of passive learning will keep deaf students on task.

Build a positive relationship with parents. Parents can be a great help in behavior management. Let them know that you are looking out for their child's best interest. Visit with them regularly, and let them know when their child is doing well.

### **Dealing with Serious Misbehavior**

Unfortunately, even the best classroom managers sometimes face challenges that seem beyond their control. In such case, my program has developed the following steps:

First, review your classroom behavior plan and check for things that might have been overlooked. Seek out behavior documentation from the past. Gather current documentation. You can document using logs purchased from a teacher supply store or use informal journals to document behavior. Don't be

afraid to consult support staff and request advice. The counselor or school psychologist might know interventions that did or did not work well for a student in the past. The nurse may have medical information that is new to you. Call the parents and tell them about the behavior. They may be able to identify a reason for the behavior, and they may be able to help with intervention.

Second, hold a parent conference.



Talking with parents in a formal setting will let them know about the severity of the behavior. It is also helpful to document parent conferences. Consider modification of your classroom plan and implement it for at least 10 school days. At the end of the 10 school days, schedule a staff meeting with all staff who work with the student (teachers, administrators, and support staff). Share with each other what is working and what is not.

Third, if behavior is still a challenge, refer the student to the counselor for several visits over at least two weeks. The counselor should begin to conduct more formalized assessment and request a functional behavior assessment. Functional behavior assessments are required by current special education law prior to implementing a behavior management plan.

Fourth, hold a second staff meeting

and discuss the functional behavior assessment with the team. The team may decide to develop a behavior management plan and schedule an Admissions, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meeting. The behavior management plan should be implemented for a reasonable amount of time before moving to the fifth step.

Fifth and finally, if behavior is still unmanageable, hold another ARD meeting and review the behavior management plan. Review documentation and discuss the plan's effectiveness or lack thereof. If needed, the team may request a psychological consultation or assessment from the school psychologist. Upon review of the psychological assessment, the team should also review the placement of the student. If behavior is still severe, the team may consider that behavioral needs supersede language needs, necessitating a change in placement.

### **Conclusion**

This article outlines a few of the things that teachers of the deaf can do to improve students' behavior. Keep in mind that there are many other things that can and should be done to help foster a well-managed class. Managing behavior with students can be challenging whether they are hearing or deaf. Good classroom managers are proactive and prepare ahead of time. Deaf students need to have feelings vocabulary directly taught to them. Every educational program for deaf students should have a plan in place to appropriately manage students with serious behavior problems. Planning for student success, minimizing down time, and teaching feelings vocabulary will help you manage behavior and maximize student learning.

### **Reference**

Wong, H. K., & Wong, R. T. (1998). *The first days of school*. Mountain View, CA: Wong Publications.