

COVER DAY & SUPPLY · ALL GRADES

Behavior in Unfamiliar Classrooms

What works and what doesn't

The challenge

Behavior management as a supply or cover teacher is harder for one specific reason: you don't have the relationship that makes everyday discipline work for the class teacher. The class teacher has spent a year building authority through relationship, consistency, and accumulated rapport. You have 30 seconds when the children walk in. You need a different toolkit — one that works without long-term relationship. The strategies below are designed for exactly that.

What WORKS without relationship

Calm authority Quiet voice. Slow movements. Eye contact. Confident posture. Children read these as adult-in-charge within 10 seconds.	Specific expectations 'I want everyone in their seat by the time I count to 5. Then I'll know we're ready to begin.' Concrete. Measurable. Done.
Catching positive early Within the first 5 minutes, name 3 children doing something well. 'Sam — thank you for sitting up properly. Sofia — quick hands away.'	Using their existing rules Look at the wall. Read the school's rules. 'Your school has these rules: [reads]. We're going to follow these today.'
Brief, public, fair Corrections are brief, public-but-not-shaming, fair. 'Sam — sit up please. Thank you.' Move on. Don't dwell.	Asking for help from peers 'Sofia, you've been brilliant this morning. Can you remind us — where do you put your books when you're finished?' Recruits compliant peers.

What DOESN'T work



Threats you can't deliver 'I'll tell Mrs Walker.' 'You'll lose break.' Children know whether you can actually do these things. If you can't, don't bluff.	Trying to be the cool supply 'I'm not like your normal teacher.' 'We can have fun today.' Children read it as weakness. Don't compete with the class teacher; complement them.
Fighting for it publicly Some children will test. Engaging in a public fight escalates. Quietly redirect. If they push, calmly: 'Let's talk about this in a minute when everyone else is working.' Move on.	Apologising for being there 'I know you'd rather have your own teacher...' Bad opener. Confident: 'I'm Mrs X. Nice to meet you. We're going to have a good day.'
Lecture-mode discipline 5-minute talks about behavior expectations are excruciating and don't work. Brief is better. Action is better than words.	Inconsistent enforcement If you said no chatting, enforce it. If you let it slide for one row, you've lost the whole class. Be consistent or don't enforce in the first place.

When something does go wrong

1. STAY CALM. Your nervous system is the steadying force in the room. If you escalate, the room escalates. 2. ADDRESS PRIVATELY WHERE POSSIBLE. Crouch by the desk. Quiet voice. 'I need you to [X]. Are we OK?' Most children comply. 3. USE 'WHEN... THEN...'. 'When you've finished tidying that, then we can move on.' Avoids confrontation, gives them an out. 4. IF THEY REFUSE. Don't escalate. 'I'm going to give you a minute. Come and find me when you're ready.' Move on. They will usually engage within 2 minutes. 5. IF THEY PERSIST. Send them, with a note, to the year partner or whichever adult the school has flagged for cover support. No long argument. 6. IF SAFETY IS AT ISSUE — get help fast. Send a child to the office. 'Please tell Mrs Y that Mrs X needs help in [room].' Don't try to manage genuine danger alone. 7. AT THE END OF THE DAY, write it down for the class teacher. Specific. Brief. No emotional venting.

What about the difficult class?

Some classes are notoriously hard for supply. Word of warning gets passed at the school gate. If you've been warned (or you spot it yourself): 1. DON'T ENGAGE with what their class teacher 'lets them do.' You're you. They're getting your version today. 2. KEEP TRANSITIONS TIGHT. Most classroom drift happens in transitions. Plan precisely how each one will work. 3. SHORTER ACTIVITIES. Their attention span on a stranger's day is shorter than usual. Plan more, smaller blocks. 4. MORE MOVEMENT. Brain breaks. Stretches. Standing options. Movement burns the disruption energy. 5. BE SURE ABOUT YOUR PLAN. Children sense uncertainty. If you don't know what's coming next, they will fill the space. 6. ASK THE OFFICE / DEPUTY. Often they'll send extra adult support to known difficult classes when there's a supply. Don't be too proud to accept. If you've had a brilliant or terrible day with a known difficult class, the agency notice. Word spreads quickly. Schools that find supply teachers who can hold their hardest class will



book them again, sometimes pay better, often offer permanent positions.

