

MODULE 22 CONTROL-SEEKING PUPILS

INTRODUCTION TO THE MODULE

This presentation is appropriate for use in primary and secondary schools. It offers an understanding of a group of pupils who may be described as control seeking. While we are generally opposed to the process of labelling children, a degree of hypothetical (we use this word to suggest that the descriptor is a hypothesis rather than a hard and fast description – an idea to work with) description can be useful providing it leads to a potential course of action related to the descriptor, in this case control seeking. It is important to have a view of the needs of the child and distinguish these from other needs, attention-seeking being the most common, because the strategies differ between these two groups. Also much of what is recommended for control-seeking pupils can seem counter-intuitive. Of course none of the strategies described here is guaranteed (if only); they are offered on a ‘try them and see what effect they have’ basis.

This presentation is typically delivered after-school and as such (without long discussion) lasts for just over an hour. The presentation does not have identified activities but there are several points at which the presenter may stop and invite participants’ views depending on the time available.

SLIDE 4 FOUR GOALS OF MISBEHAVIOUR

This slide sets the context for this presentation. It suggests that there may be four main reasons (called ‘goals’ in this slide; this presentation will use the term ‘needs’) why children misbehave. In this presentation we are concerned only with those pupils who have a need for control. In using the term ‘need’ we are suggesting that, in a sense, the behaviour exhibited by the pupil is logical in that it meets a need the pupil has to exert control over their life and those who are a part of that life.

The naming of these four goals comes from the work of Rudolf Dreikurs, an American psychiatrist and educator who developed psychologist Alfred Adler’s system of individual psychology into a pragmatic method for understanding the purposes of misbehaviour in children. Dreikurs suggested that misbehaviour is the result of feeling a lack of belonging. This lack of belonging leads to the child attempting to meet four compensatory goals or needs: power, attention, revenge or avoidance (inadequacy).

Dreikurs suggested that the above needs were hierarchical. Firstly, children want attention. If they do not receive the attention they want through their behaviour, they move on to seeking power. If they are unsuccessful in this then they want revenge. If they can’t get revenge, they begin to feel inadequate and will develop a ‘leave me alone, I don’t want to be a part of this’ (avoidance) attitude.

This presentation does not consider the four goals of misbehaviour in the sequential way described above, it looks at issues arising from a need for control discretely from the other three goals.

SLIDES 5 AND 6 WHAT THEY ARE LIKE

These, it is suggested, are the main characteristics (there may be others) of pupils who have a need for control. The key aspects are that they are bright and can use language effectively. They are a relatively small group (as compared with attention-seeking pupils) but they ‘punch above their weight’ in that they are disproportionately difficult to manage by parents and carers, teachers and support staff for reasons which are explained in a moment. Point 5 of slide 5 is important in that, as is often the case people do not fit

neatly into one category, so control-seeking children may 'overlap' into the attention-seeking group. This is a helpful sign in that it indicates that they are willing to cede a degree of control over their behaviour to the adult who gives the attention possibly but necessarily in the form of praise or reward. Strange though it may sound, moving towards attention seeking is an indication of the pupil moving in the right direction. Attention-seeking pupils are more easily managed in that an adult can say – you can have attention if you do these things/ behave in this way. This does not work for control-seeking pupils because they don't like being told what they should do.

Slide 7 Is your child in the control-seeking category?

You can use this slide as an activity with the group. Ask them to think of a pupil with the characteristics (not all negative) on the previous slide and with whom they are experiencing difficulties and then rate the pupil against these characteristics on this slide. There is no hard and fast total which identifies the child as control-seeking but a total score in excess of 70 would suggest that it is worth considering and using some of the strategies described in this presentation if only on an experimental basis.

Competitive for better or for worse – Their competitiveness can be used to the advantage of the adult.

SLIDE 8 WHY THEY ARE LIKE THEY ARE

This slide offers an explanation of why some pupils seek to control adults. Because control-seeking children are intelligent they have the cognitive capacity to understand that their lives are not what they would wish – poor home circumstances; parents who cannot or do not care to exercise control; parents less intelligent than they are; failure at school even though they have the intellectual capacity to be successful; poor friendship skills, drug, alcohol, tobacco dependency or even a combination of all these factors. Sometimes being dull has its advantages! By seeking to control adults they achieve a sense of power otherwise missing in their lives. In some cases because they believe that adults are less intelligent than they are they feel they are not to be trusted. In a sense they may feel that it is a matter of getting their retaliation in first because if they don't control adults then adults will control them – to their detriment.

Self-esteem can be an issue in that their self-esteem is at its highest when they are controlling the situation – the adults or their peers. The latter being less of a problem than the former! But note that control-seeking pupils do not automatically have low self-esteem. If they are good at controlling others they may have high self-esteem.

The area of psychology – *locus of control* – describes the characteristics of people in terms of those who have and value having high levels of control over their own behaviour (internal control) and those that feel they have little or no control over their behaviour, they are controlled by others (external control). Internal locus of control people might sometimes be described as 'their own man/woman'. They know what they want and believe that they can get it by their own efforts. Simply, they're in control. People with high levels of external control do not believe they have control over their own behaviour/their own lives. They believe that what other people do determines what happens to them or luck or fate or some preordained destiny plays a large part. These people often see themselves as victims in society. It is possible, however, to see control-seeking pupils as representative of the external locus of control group. Such qualities can be an asset in adult life (if not taken to extremes) but are rarely seen as such at school, where their need for control competes with that of the adults. Of course, as we have previously suggested, human beings rarely fit neatly into one category and most of us have a some of both categories depending on what we are doing or who we are with. We also vary over time rather than being fixed in one area for ever.

SLIDE 9 WHY THEY ARE A PROBLEM

The reason that this group of pupils is the most difficult to manage is that their needs are in direct conflict with adults in school or at least most adults. Not all teachers are control-freaks but most are, otherwise they probably wouldn't be teaching. This means that many situations with these pupils are win-lose, not win-win. We return to the last point later in the presentation.

SLIDE 10 THEY ARE A PROBLEM BECAUSE THEY...

Further reasons why control-seeking pupils are a problem in schools. They are hard to 'discipline' in the traditional sense. Their excellent use of language is their main 'weapon' against adult control. Adults in schools are used to winning verbal battles but with control-seeking pupils a different set of rules apply. They have a number of language-based tricks to break the behaviour – consequences link, i.e. the connection between their inappropriate behaviour and the adult given consequence or punishment – arguing and doing it well; picking the weak points in your version of events; saying you shouldn't be shouting (even though you are not). Saying things like 'you're always picking on me, what about him, he was there.' etc.

SLIDE 11 PARADOX

And yet there is a paradox with this group of pupils. As the slide shows, they are confused and we are confused! You might wish to ask the group for their comments on this slide.

SLIDE 12 FIVE APPROACHES

This slide moves the presentation on to looking at strategies for working with this group of pupils. This slide relates to the aim 'consider broad approaches to this group'. It sets the context for the more-specific strategies that follow. It is helpful for group members to locate any subsequent 'plan' for working with control-seeking pupils in one of the above, to have an idea of which approach they feel is appropriate for a particular pupil. It is likely that a bit of each part will be used, in which case it is important to know which approach is being used when as in the final point. For example:

- Where are the 'lines in the sand'? The non-negotiables?
- Which behaviours/actions will not be tolerated and will lead to an automatic consequence?
- Where are those areas where the pupil can genuinely choose what they will do? Numeracy before literacy (unlike the rest of the class); which classroom rule they will work on today/which reward will they choose, etc?
- Which behaviours might include a degree of hidden manipulation, those behaviours where the adult appears to offer a genuine and important choice but where, in fact, it does not matter to them what the pupil chooses to do?

Devise a plan where all possible issues of control are avoided. This means working round any potential 'hazards', avoiding confrontation. While there may be times when this is expedient even desirable, it is unlikely, however, that in a school setting this can be used as a full-time response. There will be times when an adult says 'We need you to do this, you have no choice!'

The last point says that it is likely that all these approaches will be relevant at one time or another, just make sure that all involved understand which approach is being used at any given time. Making mistakes with control-seeking pupils is a mistake (unless it's deliberate!).

SLIDE 13 A SENSE OF BEING IN CONTROL COMES FROM

As an introduction to specific strategies, a small digression into the adult world. Research about how and when adults experience a feeling of being in control shows these factors to be relevant. If time permits, you can ask the group to consider when they feel most in control of their lives and then compare their responses with this slide (i.e. show the slide after the initial discussion). Discuss any differences. A second discussion point might be whether they think the pupils they work with in this category have these kind of experiences, whether they would benefit from experiencing these events and if so how this might be arranged to happen perhaps more frequently than it currently does.

SLIDE 14 THEY LIKE

This section moves on to examining a number of strategies for managing the behaviour of this group of pupils. This slide offers a mixture of strategies all of which may be useful at a given time.

This slide offers some examples of circumstances, including use of language, that bring out the best in the control-seeking pupil.

It is generally better to avoid lengthy debate about their behaviour or even their learning. Keep interactions brief. Related to this point about talking to control-seeking pupils. Using language thoughtfully and with precision is vital with this group of pupils. This is no time for stuttering, hesitating, using the wrong word, getting your facts wrong.

Language that puts them at the centre of the conversation emphasizes their importance in the situation.

Rituals – self-explanatory: it is about predictability but under their control not adults (it might be worth discussing with the group how this could work in schools).

The key word here is *unemotional*. Control-seeking pupils generally like a choice but don't want to think it is any big deal so the adult has to offer the choice in a 'take it or leave it' manner not as if it were the most important thing in the world. It may be but showing that agreeing to make an adult-offered choice would be a severe loss of face for this pupil.

This is a controversial point, one of those counterintuitive points we mentioned earlier. Usually, children with behavioural needs are thought to benefit from interacting with a reduced number of adults, teachers and teaching assistants, for example. It may be thought wise to have only one TA working with a challenging pupil because relationship forming, consistency and predictability are thought to be important. While this may be generally the case, we suggest that control-seeking children, apart from the fact that they are hard work, actually find it more difficult to control adults if the adults keep changing! Getting to know you is not always an advantage when working with control-seeking pupils. What they may be getting to know are your weaknesses so that they can use these to their advantage and your disadvantage. These are the pupils who will say – 'Do you realize that you've got a moustache, miss' (a true story). In this way, they keep control over the adult. So the message is – keep moving: a moving target is harder to hit! Sounds a tad unkind this point, but we think there's something to it. This can be a real asset in secondary schools

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(different teachers and perhaps different TAs). The battle can be much greater in primary schools where it is more of a one on one battle.

Because control is important to them they admire people who have control over others. Unfortunately, this can be a negative when they admire older pupils or adults who exercise control through violence and intimidation. Positive role models who have positive influence are the key here.

A similar point to the last one except that the 'status' comes through, what might be called, force of personality rather than actual status.

Adults for whom control is not an issue (some teachers see themselves as facilitators of learning, sometimes pejoratively called *laissez faire*, rather than controllers of behaviour, similarly the 'kindly TA'. There is, as suggested, less room for flexibility in primary schools when it comes to matching pupil with teacher personality but there are possibilities in matching a TA to the child. We suggest either somebody who is excellent at exercising control or somebody who does not see control as an issue in their relationship with the pupil – they achieve results through less head-on methods. In secondary schools it may be possible to match, in a similar manner, teacher to pupil.

SLIDE 15 Do...

Ask the group to think of how they feel as an adult when they are praised by somebody. Do they feel patronized or that the person has some kind of control over them now? Perhaps not, but for control-seeking pupils this is how it feels and they then try to return to the status quo.

You can still recognize their efforts but in a more low key fashion using curiosity or even, strange though it may seem, stupidity. You are asking them how they managed to be successful; this still gives them the control but encourages them to understand that success can feel OK. Of course they may spot the ruse and simply refuse to engage in your 'game', in which case shrug and walk away.

SLIDE 16 Do...

The first point – keeping calm, don't get into arguments – sounds sensible enough but the second point – another example of keeping on the move – sounds contrary to usual practice. Under normal circumstances, if something works an adult will want to continue with it. This runs the risk of the system getting tired and overly familiar to the pupil which means they can start to manipulate it to their advantage. Keep them guessing. Also as with the previous slide point two sounds counter-intuitive. What happened to the idea of consistency you may ask? With control-seeking pupils consistency can be their friend and your enemy!

The final point relates to an earlier suggestion that if the control-seeking pupil shows signs that they are willing to accept praise/reward this indicates that their behaviour is becoming more under adult control (in this case this is a good thing). So the adult needs to be alert to/test out the pupil's willingness to the pupil agreeing to fit into the school systems.

SLIDE 17 Do...

More slightly strange, counter-intuitive pieces of advice largely about not being too enthusiastic about their efforts and making them come to you. Takes a bit of nerve and of course it is possible that they won't play

this game and simply walk away, in which case you need to think again. The final point may provoke some debate in the group; give them the opportunity to discuss it.

SLIDE 18 Do...

Again, counter-intuitive strategies. It is not common practice in well-intentioned schools to suggest to a pupil that they actually cannot do something or to withhold praise for a job well done. This is sometimes called reverse or paradoxical psychology. Similarly, point 5! Point 6 is a less controversial aspect of their competitiveness.

Sociograms can be useful in finding this out (see the presentation *Managing Difficult Groups in the Classroom* (Module 13) for more information on sociograms).

SLIDE 19 THE POSITIVE VIEW

Every cloud, of course, has that silver lining. As suggested earlier, control-seekers may do well in non-school settings or later in life. The trick is to find a legitimate outlet for their need for control: leadership roles, posts of responsibility, helping the less able or younger pupils (who don't threaten their position), making them special or better still unique in some way. When you find a positive role, don't over-emphasize the positive as it may perversely cause the pupil to reject the role. A modest drip-drip approach is usually better.

SLIDE 20 REMEMBER

A generally helpful mindset when working with any pupils who have challenging behaviour and one which also applies to this group. You would hope that the times identified would be times when the pupil was well behaved and engaged in an appropriate activity. Why do they feel good about this activity? How can you build on this information to develop a planned way forward for this pupil?

SLIDES 21 AND 22 IBP TARGETS

Related to the final point on the last slide – developing IBPs. In fact, this group of pupils may not respond to any form of IBP generation. This simply smacks of adult control. So the adult will need to be very clever in how this process unfolds.

SLIDE 23 SKILLS CIRCLE

This skills circle is given as an example, as such it refers to some but not all of the strategies described in this presentation. It is intended to help bridge the gap between the presentation and use of the strategies in a real-life setting. As suggested in the next slide, you may wish to change the headings.

Each strategy heads one of the segment and each segment is divided into 10 sections. Each section will be rated from 1 to 10 (the ring nearest the centre being 1 and the outermost ring 10), first for its *level of importance* (10 = I think this is an important area; 1 = I think this is not important for me) as perceived by the participant in working with control-seeking pupils. This produces the red profile. Second for the perceived *skill level* (how good am I at that?) of the person completing the circle in that particular area, the blue profile, again 1 to 10.

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This is just an example; nothing should be inferred from the profile on this slide about the importance of strategies. From this profile you can choose in which area you wish to develop your own skills. This might be an area where the gap between importance and skill level is the greatest – ‘getting him to set his own targets’ for example, has a five-point ‘gap, so you may choose this. Alternatively, you might choose an area where your skill level is quite high and you have rated that area also high, for example – ‘Using competitive language’ (only a two-point gap). In this case, you might have more confidence in bringing this skill level up to scratch. You do not always have to choose the hardest target, nor do you when working with the pupil. In both cases, you might choose a target where you have a good chance of success.

A blank example is included as Handout 17 (a separate PDF is provided on the CD-ROM). Participants can insert titles they feel to be relevant to them. Then participants should rate each area for its importance, as they see it, to the task of working with control-seeking pupils and then rate their own skill level.

Sample