

Using Group Work to Reduce Behaviour Problems



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Hello,

In this little report I'm going to give you some reasons why it's a jolly good idea to use cooperative group work in your lessons. OK, I'll admit one of the reasons I've produced it is to draw attention to some of our other products but if you are currently struggling to get students motivated in lessons and face continuous behaviour problems, I'm sure you'll still appreciate it.

I'm also going to give you some creative ways of grouping your students, some guidelines for managing group work sessions and I'll finish by giving you a really useful group work activity which you can adapt for virtually any area of the curriculum. I hope you enjoy it...

The Benefits of Using Cooperative Group Work in Lessons

Let's start with the benefits and some of the reasons why a properly-managed group work session can reduce behaviour problems. Here are five big ones...

- 1. There is less incentive for pupils to disrupt the lesson** to get your attention because attention is being received naturally - from the other members of the group.
- 2. Positive peer relationships are developed.** As a result of pupils helping each other to reach a common goal, they build strong bonds. As the sense community grows in a class (through regular group work sessions) there are fewer arguments and fewer fall-outs between students.
- 3. Lower achieving pupils gain confidence and motivation.** By working collaboratively with higher achieving students, low achieving students are able to take part in activities without feeling they lack necessary skills and understanding. By being actively involved in the lesson activities (instead of being bored or frustrated) they are less prone to disrupt. The high ability students also benefit through the process of guiding and supporting their fellow group members - their understanding of the material is reinforced.

4. It saves the teacher time. Once students get used to the cooperative learning framework they effectively teach themselves. The teacher is free from constant requests for attention and can give quality support when it is required rather than when it is *demanded*.

5. Social skills are naturally developed. Skills such as self-expression, decision-making, responsibility, accountability, sharing, listening, conflict management are naturally practiced and developed during group work sessions. This has a knock-on effect of reducing the occurrence of behaviour problems brought about due to a lack of these skills.

How to Group Students

Different types of groupings have different benefits and challenges so the type of group you choose depends on various factors. In some cases it might be suitable to allow students to pick their own groups but generally it will be up to the teacher to decide which groupings work best for the class and for particular projects.

Type 1: Random Groups

This is one of the quickest ways to form groups and is best suited to either 'fun' sessions where the mix of individuals is not so important, or when working with new groups of individuals you don't yet know particularly well.

Like '**friendship groups**' (where students are simply told to get together in a group with their friends), students see this as a 'fair' way to be grouped as it is based on their free choice rather than being dictated by the teacher. As you get to know your students you will naturally find that grouping some individuals together is not appropriate, and will almost certainly want to move away from random/friendship groupings to more planned and organised methods such as Cooperative Learning Teams (see below) where students' abilities and genders are taken into consideration.

Four ideas for forming 'Random Groups'

1. Number round the class

Numbering each class member is a very quick and easy way of forming random groups and there is potential for sub-grouping part-way through an activity if necessary; eg start by counting the class off in fours and have each 'group of four' work together for the first activity. Have the class re-group later by putting all the ones together in one group, all the twos together in another group, and so on.

TIP: If you want your sub-groups to form with minimum disruption and confusion deal with them in stages and get them to identify themselves to each other. Simply telling all the 'ones' to get together will cause chaos because nobody knows who all the 'ones' are - they will be shouting out to each other to try and identify the right group. You can eliminate this problem very easily:

"All the 'ones' raise your right hand. Keep your hand raised until you are in a group of four 'ones'. Once you have found three other number 'ones', put your hands down and sit down in your new group."

Give them a few minutes and then go through the other teams.

Alternatively, you could give them badges or some other way of identifying each other easily such as '**Colour/shape cards**' below.

2. Colour/shape Cards

Issue each pupil a colour/shape card (e.g. pieces of card cut into circle, rectangle, square and circle shapes in different colours). Four groups can then be formed by choosing one shape and giving each pupil a card in one of the four colours. i.e. all pupils would be given a circle card and then split into reds, blues, greens and yellows.

There are further opportunities for group sub-division if the different shapes are also brought in to play. In a class of thirty-two (for ease of explanation), there would be eight teams of four. We could issue eight of each colour card to the class members to get our initial grouping. This would give us two teams of four in each colour.

If we wanted the option of splitting the groups later in the activity, instead of giving cards with one shape as above, we would give out two shape cards for each colour. i.e. the main red group would no longer consist of eight circles but would now be two red triangles, two red squares, two red circles and two red rectangles. We would split this group into two red subgroups each consisting of one of each shape. This is not as complicated as it sounds!

Later in the activity each pupil could form a new group with three new members by putting all the shapes together instead of the colours.

"OK, we're going to form new groups and share what we've learned. You need to find three new team members who have the same SHAPE as you but in a different colour. In your new group you should have four different coloured versions of your shape."

3. Chocolate bars/candy

This method is very popular with students and is a good one to use on a special occasion, or when you are trying to get a difficult group on side. Buy a range of chocolate bars or small packets of sweets/candy. You need the same number of sweet types as groups you want to form (so no 'hundreds and thousands'!). The best to use are the 'fun size' chocolate bars - you get around fifteen to twenty of one type in a bag. Six groups of five would require therefore six different types of candy and five of each type.

Stick one chocolate bar/packet of candy under each seat (using tape) and when you want the students to form their groups ask them to check their seat to find their gift. They then arrange themselves in groups of the same candy type.

To make sure groups don't get mixed up put a large picture of each candy type on the wall in different places around the room. All the 'Mars' bars meet under the 'Mars' picture, all the 'pastilles' meet under the 'pastille' picture etc.

Oops, nearly forgot. Remember to check for food allergies on the SEN register before running this one (unless combining with a first aid class).

4. Comic strips:

Here's a slightly more creative method.. Each participant takes a turn at picking a single comic frame out of a large container.

After the entire group has each chosen one, the participants begin to search for others with the same comic strip sequence. (Each sequence will relate to a different cartoon character -Dennis the Menace, Minnie the Minx etc.) After the participants have found everyone in their group, they must arrange themselves so that the sequence of frames is in chronological order to form the comic strip correctly and then sit down together.

Type 2: Cooperative Learning Teams

Cooperative learning Teams (I also refer to them as 'Diverse Groups') are *mixed* in terms of sex, ethnicity (where relevant) and achievement levels and have been shown through numerous research studies to show significant gains in academic achievement and motivation.

Generally, a diverse group will consist of a high achiever, a low achiever and two middle achievers, and it will consist of males *and* females. When appropriate, ethnic groups will also be equally represented. Forming and managing these groupings is obviously not as

straightforward as random groupings but the benefits they bring to the classroom are many.

Diverse groups are created for long term projects (usually spanning three to six weeks at least). If groups are changed more frequently than this there is insufficient time for individuals to bond as a team and if they are never changed, the opportunities for students to use their social skills in new groupings are lost.

Groups should be changed from time to time, even when team members are working well together to give students the chance to bond with others in the class and also to give team members a break from each other. Invariably, some teams won't get on as harmoniously as others; subjecting Itchy and Scratchy to the same groupings for a whole half term of work is unfair and will be detrimental to their own development (as well as creating unnecessary classroom management issues).

Although diverse groups have been shown to stimulate academic achievement this method should never be the *only* grouping type used in cooperative sessions. If it were, the benefits of the other types of groupings would not be realised. From time to time therefore, the teacher should use groupings such as mixed skills, similar skills, same interest, same ability and peer-support groups (all explained fully in both our '[Needs Focused Lessons™](#)' & '[Motivate Your Disinterested Students](#)' resource packs) to get the most from students and allow them to get the most from each other.

How to Form Cooperative Learning Teams:

Here's a very simple, low-tech method for grouping your students in Cooperative Learning Teams using some sticky Post-It notes. You will need the following: a class list with pupils ranked according to their ability level.

To make the process as simple as possible, we rank ability by just three broad groups – **Low, Medium** and **High**. The following picture shows what I mean but it doesn't have to be completed in a spreadsheet. You can use paper, or even the back of a beer mat if you're doing this in the pub after work.

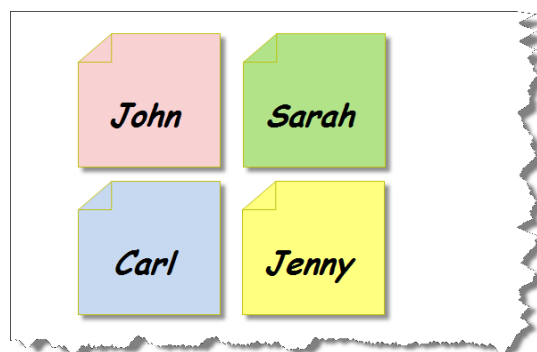
2	Class List	
3	Name	Ranked by colour: Black = High, Dark Blue = Medium, Light Blue = Low
4	Rachael	
5	Hammad	
6	Brian	
7	Kelly	
8	Sophie	
9	John	
10	Steven	
11	Kyle	
12	Ryan	
13	Kate	
14	Andrew	
15	Heather	
16	Sahid	
17	Julie	
18	Bob	

This method is very easy to orchestrate and provides a really easy way of changing groups around if they're not working. It also provides a handy visual reference for students.

Using your ability-ranked class list write the name of each student on a colour-coded post-it note. The medium ability students will be sub-divided into two groups so that you will have four groups in total – mediums on one colour note, highs on another and the two low groups each on two different coloured notes.

Groups can now be selected by taking one student from each colour group and putting them together on a team sheet (a large piece of paper or card). Individuals can easily be moved from group to group until a satisfactory grouping is obtained, thanks to the wonderful re-stickability (is that a word?) properties of the Post-It note, and the finished team sheet can then be put on display for easy reference.

Remember that some students just love to mess teachers around by changing the arrangement of the notes to cause confusion. You can prevent that by coating the sheet with some clear polythene, or by employing the traditional method of shouting at them.



A note on gender: Of course it may not always be possible to have an equal ratio of boys to girls on each team - but wherever possible do try to avoid having one boy with

three girls, or vice versa. This grouping usually results in the odd one out either being totally ignored or, if the gene pool has been kind to them, being given undue attention. It is better to have two of each sex on as many teams as possible and then, if necessary, have a team all of the same sex for the remainders.



If you would like a way to **effortlessly create Cooperative Learning Teams**, we have a great piece of software for you called **Team Maker™**. It is delivered as either immediate download or on CD.

If you would like to read the instruction manual to see how it works [click here](#). If you would like to order a copy click the link below.

[Click Here to learn how to automatically create cooperative learning teams](#)

Managing group work sessions

Obviously you can't just put students into groups and expect the session to run smoothly – it takes careful management and well-planned organised activities to run a successful session of group work.

Managing group work sessions successfully means that problems are, as much as is possible, *prevented* from happening. The more effectively you pre-empt and prevent problems, the more pleasant and manageable the session will be.

The first step in preventing problems is to make sure *all* students know *exactly* what they will be doing during the session. In our classroom management courses we use the analogy of giving them a clear map to follow – “Give them a clear map to follow and there is more chance of them getting where you want them to go.”

When I run coaching and training sessions at schools I'm amazed at the number of teachers who *wait* for something to go wrong in the classroom before doing anything about it. This is backward. Instead of waiting for students to get it wrong, is it not better to show them exactly what you want them to do in advance so they have fewer excuses to do it wrong?

There are three main ways to teach your students how you want them to behave during group work...

1. Establish routines
2. Explain & model desired actions

3. Assign student roles

...but in this *brief* report I'm only going to concentrate on the first one:

Establishing Routines

A routine cements your instructions in place so that they are the same *every time*. This means your students develop the right habits through repetition. It is when we give different instructions for a task that we get inconsistencies – and it is difficult for a student to know what to do when the rules or instructions keep changing.

For group work, you need to think about exactly what you want your students to do and exactly how you want them to behave during the group work session. Think about 'hot spot' and problem areas - issues which always tend to create problems, such as asking for help, looking for equipment, excessive talking, wandering round the room aimlessly bumping into things etc. These problems need to be pre-empted and prevented by being written into your routine – as in the following example.

Sample Routine for Group Work

- Stay in your allotted group
- Ask your team members for help if you have a question
- Help your team mates if you are asked for help
- Ask for help from the teacher only when the group agrees on the same question
- Work within stated noise levels

Once you've decided on a routine it needs to be *taught* to students, the same way you would introduce and teach any new topic. Demonstrate what you want students to do at each stage of the routine and exactly how you want them to act. Then have them practice this several times over the next few sessions until the routine becomes a habit. Then have the routine laminated and displayed on the wall for easy reference. Once these steps have been taken, whenever a student is off-task you need only point at the routine from that and say "you know what to do."

You will probably find there are steps within your main 'Group Work' routine which could become additional routines in themselves - such as the steps students should take to 'ask

for help' in the correct manner. If you want your students to ask for help in a certain way, they need to be shown or taught the specific way – with another routine. For example, a routine for asking for help might be:

1. Check your work yourself once more to see if you really need help
2. Ask your partner
3. If you still need help, stay in your seat, raise your hand and wait in silence for a member of staff to come to you

Managing Noise Levels

Here are some tips for managing noise levels during group work:

1. Assign a 'noise monitor' to each group

It's their job to keep noise levels at a previously agreed level.

2. Make sure each group has a clearly defined area to work in

Groups should be discouraged from mixing with each other.

3. Use the traffic light system

A green card on the board means noise levels are fine as they are. Orange is a warning that it's getting too rowdy in the room and they need to be quieter. Red is a call for a period of total silence for a while.

In the **Whiteboard resources** area of [Needs Focused Lessons™](#) we have added a simple Noise Level meter on Power Point.

4. Use the token system

Give each student three cards or tokens of some sort. Whenever they speak out of turn they have to surrender one of their tokens. If they behave/participate particularly well they can win back tokens.

5. Hands up

Explain that when you have your hand in the air they have to do the same in total silence. The last person to do so gets a check on the board or some other type of small sanction. If they put their hand up but carry on talking it is twice as ignorant so they receive two checks.

6. Sin Bin

Students who aren't buying in to the group session and are spoiling it for the rest of their team are given a clear choice: unless you are prepared to follow the instructions for group work then you will have to work on your own. The 'sin bin' area should be a table well away from other groups with individual tasks prepared and laid out for them to get on with. Be careful not to have more than one student in this area at a time - otherwise the 'sin bin' will be perceived as more fun than the group work session.

7. Give instructions via a recording

Curiosity and novelty mean that a normally rowdy class of pupils will listen attentively to a recording of you giving instructions. This frees you up to set up equipment and watch them covertly.

Ten Tips For Successful Group Work Sessions

1. Set deadlines for tasks. Make sure students are fully aware of time constraints throughout the session with frequent reminders.

"You have twenty minutes left... you should have finished part one by now."

2. Keep tasks achievable and fairly short especially in early sessions - tasks that are too difficult or that go on for too long will cause students to lose interest in future group work sessions.

3. Give each group member a clear role and make sure they understand what this role entails.

4. Have a feedback session at the end of all group work to enable students to discuss what worked well and what didn't.

5. Take photos of students engaged in group work and display them - it is good for students to see themselves having fun.

6. Get groups to come up with a 'team name'.

7. Have prizes, certificates, stickers, cups, trophies and silly awards – toys etc which are awarded to pupils for peak performance in their respective roles.

8. Have an exciting award ceremony at the end of each project where team efforts as well as individual efforts are recognised.

“Best motivator this week is...”

“Best presenter this week is...”

“Special award for someone who resolved conflict between two team members...”

Make the presentations fun and build ceremony into the whole issue of group work.

9. Assign the role of ‘reporter’ to each team – their task is to write a brief summary of any successes the team members had throughout the project.

10. Always have ten items in your lists – it’s a nice round number.

11. You see what I mean? Eleven items just looks wrong.

Sample Active/Cooperative Learning Activity:

Peer Lessons

Overview: There is some truth in the old saying ‘You never really learn a subject until you teach it’. In this activity each group is involved in preparing and teaching new information to the rest of the class.

Number of people: Any group size.

Materials: Suitable teaching and resource preparation materials should be made available for students to choose from including poster making materials, visual aids and props.

Time: This activity is designed to last for an entire lesson although additional time (during preceding lessons) needs to be allocated for preparation and research.

Directions:

1. Students are placed in teams of four. Teams can be randomly selected but this activity works best with diverse groupings so that low ability students can be given the motivation and support they may need.

2. Each group is given a topic, skill, concept or piece of information to teach to the rest of the group.

3. Students are given time to research their task and decide how they will present their information (in a preceding lesson). They are encouraged to avoid lecture presentations so as to make the learning experience as active as possible and must make sure all group-members are involved in some capacity in the teaching process.

Suggestions for teaching methods could include:

- Visual aids
- Role-plays/skits
- Quiz games and puzzles
- Q and A sessions
- Puzzles
- Practical sessions
- Production of worksheets, handouts and reading material

4. Each group presents their lesson to the rest of the class.

If you enjoyed these ideas you can get a STACK more in our complete **Needs Focused Lessons™** resource pack including...

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Rob Plevin is a behaviour management specialist and relentless optimist. He runs the website <http://www.behaviourneeds.com> and presents training courses internationally on working successfully with challenging young people for teachers, lecturers, care workers, prison officers and parents.

His live courses and INSET sessions are frequently described as '**unforgettable**' and he has been rated as an 'outstanding' teacher by the UK's Office for Standards in Education.

"I found Rob Plevin's workshop just in time to save me from giving up. It should be compulsory - everybody in teaching should attend a Needs-Focused workshop and meet the man with such a big heart who will make you see the important part you can play in the lives of your most difficult pupils."

Heather Beames, Teacher, London course attendee

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