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 Learning online journal

## **Passive-Aggressive Behavior in the Classroom:**

How Educators Can Confront and Change Sugarcoated Hostility from Students

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**G**ary is a fourth-grade student. Whenever his teacher, Mrs. Blackburn, asks him to do something in class, he readily agrees to do it but then finds ways to avoid making good on his word. One day, Mrs. Blackburn asked Gary to go to the bookshelf at the back of the classroom and bring her the Level M Guided Reading book. Gary nodded his head in agreement but looked irritated. He loudly dragged his feet across the classroom floor as he walked to the bookshelf. Within seconds, he called out, "I don't see it!" Gary quickly shuffled back to his desk with exaggerated foot-steps.

Mrs. Blackburn gently suggested that Gary might be looking on the wrong shelf. "Try the top shelf instead of the middle shelf, please," she said. Without moving from his desk, Gary replied, "It's not there."

Frustrated, Mrs. Blackburn instructed Gary to find the Level W book, pull it out of the bookcase, and check to see if it was the Level M reader, placed upside down. Gary got up from his desk slowly, walked to the back of the room, and stood in front of the bookshelf for five solid minutes. Finally, he turned to Mrs. Blackburn, who had moved on to teaching a different part of the lesson and loudly interrupted her shouting, "It's not there!"

At this point, Mrs. Blackburn was so frustrated that she stopped her lesson and walked toward the bookshelf. From no less than eight feet away, she easily spotted the M volume on the top shelf where she had asked Gary to look. With Gary at her side, she pointed to it and said in a disgusted voice, "There it is." Gary smirked and replied, "Oh yeah, I didn't see it."

Do you work with a student who chronically procrastinates, sulks, underperforms, tests the spirit of class rules, and undermines your authority? Does this young person have a way of breaking every rule you set but in subtle ways with plausible justification? When interacting with this student, do you typically feel like you are on an emotional roller coaster in your own classroom? If so, you are likely dealing with a passive-aggressive person.

Passive-aggressive behavior is a deliberate, but covert, way of expressing feelings of anger (Long, Long, & Whitson, 2016). Passive aggression is motivated by a person's fear of expressing anger directly. The passive-aggressive student believes life

will only get worse if adults know of his anger, so he expresses anger indirectly through the types of behaviors previously described. All in all, these behaviors are designed to "get back" at an authority figure without that person immediately recognizing the child's underlying anger.

In *The Angry Smile: The New Psychology of Passive-Aggressive Behavior at Home, at School, in Marriage and Close Relationships, in the Workplace, and Online*,

we propose that the passive-aggressive student seems to derive genuine pleasure out of frustrating others. For this reason, we have dubbed this pattern of behavior "the angry smile." Read on to learn how to recognize the red flags of passive aggression in

the classroom and gain effective strategies for how to change this troubling pattern of behavior.

## **Level 1: Temporary Compliance**

Passive aggression, like most troubling aspects of behavior, occurs on a continuum. We have identified five distinct and increasingly pathological levels of passive-aggressive behavior that tend to occur in classrooms and schools. We call the first level *temporary compliance* because at this level, the passive-aggressive student verbally agrees to a request from an authority figure but behaviorally delays completing it.

For example, a teacher may ask students to work quietly at their seats on an assignment. For most students this is an ordinary request, but for a passive-aggressive student who feels angry and resentful at having to complete the assigned task, his response is to nod affirmatively when the teacher makes eye contact with him yet find every excuse in the book to not carry out the assignment. Instead, he may sharpen his pencil, get up to go to the bathroom, get a drink of water, ask the teacher a thousand questions, or distract the students around him. Every time he is redirected by the teacher, he has a plausible excuse—he is thirsty, he doesn't understand, his pencil won't write, and the list goes on. However, when the teacher begins to notice that this is not just a bad day for the student, but rather a chronic way of responding to unwanted tasks, she should understand this behavior is a form of passive aggression.

## **Recognizing the telltale signs of passive aggressive behavior before getting caught up in them is a key strategy for any adult.**

What can teachers do about this behavior? Educators have many options for dealing with passive-aggressive behaviors in their classrooms, starting with early recognition. The real danger of passive-aggressive behavior is that it often sneaks up on adults, quietly accumulating as a series of minor but irritating behaviors. Then, the student makes one more excuse, one more delay, and suddenly the teacher finds herself at the limit of her patience. She raises her voice, starts handing out punishments left and right, and basically reveals in front of the whole class that she has lost control of her emotions. The passive-aggressive student, on the other hand, sits there cool as a cucumber, having succeeded in frustrating his teacher and getting her to act out the anger he had been hiding. *Therefore, becoming adept at recognizing the telltale signs of passive-aggressive behavior before getting caught up in them is a key strategy for any adult.*

### **Level 2: Intentional Inefficiency**

At this level, the passive-aggressive young person verbally complies with a request. However, unlike Level 1, he actually carries it out but in a way that is purposefully below expected standards. For example, that same student we talked about before may decide to get started on his assignment right away. This time, however, he uses completely illegible handwriting or turns in such nonsense responses he makes it is clear he is defiant in his compliance.

One of the best ways teachers can cope with Level 2 passive-aggressive behavior is to *make it a point to set crystal clear expectations at the start of any assignment*. Then, when a student turns in sloppy, careless, intentionally sub-standard work, the teacher can refer back to the expectations stated at the beginning of the assignment and redirect the child to better their assignment. Teachers must be especially careful to manage their emotions in response to a passive-aggressive student. One of the most common and relationship-damaging responses to a child's passive-aggressive behavior is to lash out verbally in degrading and unprofessional ways. In a sense, the teacher is then acting out all of the child's anger for him.

### **Level 3: Letting a Problem Escalate**

At the third level of passive-aggressive behavior we have what I call *crimes of omission*. In other words, it's not what the student does, but what the student doesn't do, that creates a problem. For example, I worked with a student who shared with me that she had been angry at her teacher because she felt

like he had embarrassed her in front of the class by calling on her when she didn't know an answer. Feeling unable to talk to him about her feelings, she decided to show him. The next day, as his class was being observed by the school principal, the teacher began having trouble with his technology. First, he couldn't find the remote to advance the slides on his PowerPoint presentation. Then, he couldn't get the speakers to work so that he could play a brief video for the class. The student knew very well that the remote had fallen into the teacher's briefcase earlier in the day and the outlet he was using for the speakers had burned out. However, instead of telling the teacher what she knew, she sat in her seat silently satisfied and feeling like his embarrassment was *quid pro quo* for the humiliation he had caused her.

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Level 3 passive aggression can be especially frustrating for adults to cope with since a student can legitimately say, "I didn't do anything." Often, it is very hard to prove otherwise. In this kind of situation, the adult's best recourse is to *maintain calm and really be a role model for his students on how to cope with difficult, frustrating situations. By not losing his cool and blaming others and by staying calm and looking for solutions, the teacher plays a very important role in showing students how to be angry—productively.*

### **Level 4: Hidden but Conscious Revenge**

At Level 4 the passive-aggressive student is no longer withholding behavior but rather is quite actively seeking ways to get hidden but conscious revenge on the object of his or her anger. Technology and social media have opened up a whole new world of possibilities when it comes to anonymous ways to cause viral pain to others. In one particular instance, a student's simmering anger toward her high school science teacher motivated her to set up a fake social media account in his name and post embarrassing rumors and photos that put his career in real jeopardy. This case was an extreme example but

also too common among tech-savvy kids who have found new ways to act out their anger in hidden, yet very public, ways.

What can a teacher do when a student is using Level 4 passive-aggressive behaviors? In this particular example, legal action was taken by the school and the teacher against the student in the form of a civil suit. This student's behavior was at the extreme edge of passive aggression, but nonetheless, the key to putting an end to passive aggression at this level is to *take away any gratification that a student gets from passive-aggressive behavior. Secondly, it is critical to establish logical consequences for the behavior.* When responding in a professional manner, the educator conveys intolerance for the behavior while still showing acceptance and understanding of the student's emotional state. This helps initiate an end of the student's need for anger to be expressed in destructive, passive-aggressive ways.

### **Level 5: Self-Depreciation**

The final level, Level 5, is identified as *self-depreciation* because the passive-aggressive student is so fixated on getting back at a specific person that she is willing to behave in self-destructive ways that lead to her own personal rejection and alienation. For example, I knew a student who was raised in a family that was very authoritarian. As part of their ethnicity and culture, young people were never permitted to openly argue with their elders. Respect for a male's authority was regarded as particularly important.

The parents of the family had deemed that their daughter would go to medical school and become a doctor. The teen girl, however, was very creative and wanted to go to art school. Rather than dare openly assert her wants to her parents, she purposefully failed all of her science and math classes in her junior year of high school. She then sabotaged her own college applications to ensure being rejected from all of the universities her parents preferred.

Young people who are willing to cause serious, lasting harm to themselves through passive-aggressive acts of self-depreciation need adults to recognize their behavior for what it is. The ability to discern their true emotions from amidst the noise of their destructive behavior is critical in preventing further, riskier self-depreciation from occurring. At Level 5, we are often witnessing a pattern of pathology that merits professional intervention. *Teachers can provide*

*an incredible service to a student by looking beyond surface behavior and recognizing the depth of the young person's distress. When caring educators can connect the students (and their parents as needed) to sources of help and support, they become true champions for passive-aggressive children.*

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*For more information on strategies to confront and change passive-aggressive behavior in the classroom, please visit [www.lsci.org](http://www.lsci.org) or check out The Angry Smile online course, offered through the LSCI Institute.*

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