



Staying Present When Students Refuse Independent Work




“Warm demanders are teachers who ‘expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them to reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment.’”

— Lisa Delpit, MacArthur Award winner, Felton G. Clark Professor of Education at Southern University.

A note to the teacher:

It’s natural to feel frustrated or want to blame students who seem like they just don’t care. You’re not alone. Resistant, at-risk students often test the resolve of those who care most about their success. The key to reaching them lies in adopting proven strategies from colleagues and classroom research.

The following evidence-based strategies are designed **for teams to consider, debate, revise, and revise in their PLCs**. They aim to address the critical question: “***What predictable behaviors can we use/learn/adopt when we know certain students will resist independent work?***” Together, we will master tried and true responses that foster engagement and growth.

Strategy	Description	Teacher Actions	Teacher Scripts		Research & Evidence
Choice Making 	Provide students with meaningful choices to foster autonomy and reduce resistance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Create a menu of task options.- Encourage flexible modalities (e.g., dictating responses, drawing diagrams).- Offer simple, actionable choices students can commit to.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- “Would you like to start with the reading or the hands-on activity?”- “Try X or think about Y. I’ll check in soon.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Video Example 1- Video Example 2	Dunlap et al. (1994); Gushanas & Smith (2023) Link .
Function Based Interventions 	Use a response based on the root causes of behavior, such as attention-seeking or task avoidance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Anticipate and preempt behaviors with supportive non-verbal cues.- Modify instruction based on the behavior’s function (e.g., escape or attention-seeking)- Use proximity or visual cues to redirect attention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- “It looks like this task feels overwhelming. Let’s find a way to make it more manageable.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- EdQueen Behavior Blog-Behavior Tips	Dunlap & Fox (2011) Link .



Predictable Routines 	<p>Ensure consistency.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Post clear schedules and use countdowns for transitions - Establish calming start-of-class routines to reduce initial refusals. - Use Love and Logic's idea of offering consistent structure to reduce anxiety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "We'll move to independent work in 5 minutes. Let me know if you need help starting or Need help choosing how to start?" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Routines Resource-Blueprint Article 	<p>Flannery & Horner (1994) Link.</p>
Behavioral Momentum (a.k.a High-Probability Request Sequences) 	<p>Start with easy, high-probability tasks before progressing to more challenging requests.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Begin with simple tasks to build success and reduce resistance. - Praise each step to sustain momentum. - Model the task to reduce intimidation and increase clarity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Can you write your name on the paper? Great, now let's tackle the first question." - "Let's do one together before you continue." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Video: High-Probability Requests - PDF Resource - Example - Example 	<p>Mace et al. (1988) Link.</p>
Positive Interactions 	<p>Maintain positive teacher-student relationships while circulating often and offering proximity.</p>	<p>Greet students at the door warmly each day to set a positive tone.</p> <p>Use specific praise to highlight effort and achievement (e.g., "Great job persisting through that tough problem!").</p> <p>Don't make sarcastic remarks that could embarrass or alienate students.</p> <p>Don't single out students negatively in front of their peers. Address issues privately when possible.</p> <p>Don't assume students know expectations—clarify them explicitly and consistently.</p> <p>Don't react emotionally to challenging behavior. Stay calm and composed to de-escalate situations.</p> <p>Don't overlook small wins—acknowledge and celebrate incremental progress to keep students motivated.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I can see this is frustrating. Let's figure it out together." - "I really like how you stayed on task during that activity." <p>Instead of sarcastic remarks that embarrass. "I see you're having a tough time with this today. Let's work through it together—you've got this!" <i>(Acknowledges the challenge while offering encouragement without negativity.)</i></p> <p>Instead of singling out students negatively in front of peers: "Can I talk to you for a minute after class? I want to check in with you about something important." <i>(Ensures privacy and respect, maintaining the student's dignity.)</i></p> <p>Additional Ideas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Video: Building Relationships - 4 to 1 Strategy 	<p>Sutherland (2000) Link.</p> <p>Edutopia. (2019). <i>Welcoming students with a smile</i>. Retrieved from link. WeAreTeachers. (n.d.). <i>15+ ways to build positive teacher-student relationships</i>. Retrieved from link.</p>



Opportunities to Respond 	<p>Increase active participation through varied and frequent response methods.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use whiteboards or quick polls - Encourage Think-Pair-Share and writing/drawing as alternatives - Pose engaging, simple questions to re-engage students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Everyone take 15 seconds to write about this question and then we’ll share.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Think-Pair-Share Options - Engagement Video 	<p>Sutherland et al. (2003) Link.</p>
Function Based Task Matching 	<p>Tailor tasks to student ability, ensuring they are manageable and achievable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Break tasks into smaller parts.- Scaffold complexity as students build confidence. - Offer tasks that balance challenge and achievability based on Love and Logic’s principles of shared control. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Let’s do the first two problems together.” - “If you feel stuck let’s start with an easier part and work our way up.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - PDF: Matching Task Difficulty - Case Study 	<p>Haydon (2012) Link.</p>
Provide an Out, Accountably 	<p>Allow students a graceful way to adapt or temporarily disengage without confrontation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offer alternatives, like requesting a break or switching to a simpler task - Use visual signals for non-verbal communication - Create a reset station with calming tools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “If this feels overwhelming right now, you can take a break and come back to it later.” - “You can choose to do this now or try a simpler task first.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resource: Graceful Disengagement- Book Reference 	<p>Hockett & Doubet (2020) Link.</p>



Master Teacher Tips

Source	Basic Principles of Communicating with Students	Tips for Communicating with Students Who Refuse	Example Scripts	Further Reading
Wisdom from Mendler: Teaching Students Who Don't Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Show genuine respect and care. - Build trust through consistency. - Avoid power struggles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use neutral language to de-escalate conflicts. - Offer students choices to regain a sense of control. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I understand this is hard. Let's figure it out together." - "What would help you get started on this?" 	Mendler, A. (2000). <i>Motivating Students Who Don't Care</i> . Link
Marshall Rosenberg: Nonviolent Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on feelings and needs. - Use empathetic listening.- Avoid blame or criticism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acknowledge the student's emotions.- Use observations, not judgments, to discuss behavior.- Address their needs and frame achievable requests. 	<p>NVC Framework:</p> <p>Observation: "I noticed you haven't started the task yet."</p> <p>- Feeling: "I sense you might be feeling overwhelmed. Is that right?"</p> <p>- Need: "I'm hearing from you (or I understand) you need a little more guidance to feel comfortable starting, does that feel right to you"</p> <p>- Request: "Would it help if we broke this into smaller steps together? If not, what would help you right now?"</p>	Rosenberg, M. (2003). <i>Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life</i> . Link
Jim Fay: Love and Logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share control to build responsibility.- Offer choices with enforceable limits.- Use empathy first. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoid threats; focus on natural consequences - Offer limited choices that guide behavior. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "You can choose to finish this now or during lunch. What works for you?" - "I'd be happy to help when you're ready to start." 	Fay, J., & Funk, D. (1995). <i>Teaching with Love and Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom</i> . Link



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