"Taylor, please put up your pencil bag. You have a pencil out already. It’s time to begin your bellwork.” Mrs. Pedroza continues walking around the room as students enter her seventh grade Social Studies class.

Taylor digs in her pencil bag and mumbles, “Ugh, one minute. I’m looking for something.”

Most students are settled in and have quietly begun the bellwork. Taylor is still digging through her pencil bag. The teacher walks back to her, and in a normal speaking voice says, “Taylor, I told you to put the bag up. That’s enough. Please begin your bellwork.”

“I am! Gawd!”

“Taylor, no you’re not. Follow instructions right now and put this up. You are wasting my class time. And if you continue I will take your time and you will have to stay after school to finish this.”

A few students shift uncomfortably in their seats.

“What?! Maybe if you go away and leave me alone then I can work on my work.”

“Taylor, I’m going to stand here until you put this up.”

“If you go away I’ll put it up.”

“Okay, I’m going to send in attendance. But when I come back you better have your pencil bag put up and be working on your bellwork.”

Mrs. Pedroza goes to the computer and submits attendance. From across the room, she sees Taylor’s bag is on the desk and it looks like Taylor’s begun the assignment. Mrs. Pedroza whispers loudly across the room, “Taylor. Good. Now put the bag up.”

Taylor squints her eyes, “What? I’m working! Gawd,” and pushes her paper and pencil bag off the desk. Taylor stands up, picks up her desk, moves it aside, sits down cross-legged on the floor, crosses her arms, looks up and smirks at the teacher.

Let’s stop right here. Is anyone else sweating just reading this scenario? Unfortunately, this behavior is not uncommon.

Dr. Nicholas Long describes the conflict cycle, reminding us that when students are stressed about something at home, in their community, or at school, feelings and anxieties are activated that drive behaviors. The behaviors may be an attempt to decrease the stress or may be driven by feelings/anxieties. The way other people in the student’s life respond to the student’s behaviors can either break or fuel the cycle.

In this example, the way Mrs. Pedroza chose to address Taylor’s behavior may have resulted in increasing Taylor’s level of stress, and in turn contributed to escalated negative behaviors.

At Boys Town we like to say, “If you can predict it, then you can plan for it.” And we can predict that kids are going to enter our classes with their own feelings or anxieties, their own “mini-weather”. But let’s look at what we can do to create a climate in our classroom to help us weather their “storms”.

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In the moment:

- Check your voice tone. A University of Pennsylvania study reported that the majority of communication is transmitted non-verbally. 70% is body language, 23% is voice tone and inflection and only 7% is actual spoken words! So be aware of what your nonverbals might be “saying”.

- Stay calm. Whether it’s a deep breath, stepping away to check on other students, or imagining going home at the end of the day to pet your dog - do what you need to stay “centered” and objective in the moment.

- Talk quietly. Keep the conversation between the two of you. Use a pleasant voice and a neutral facial expression. Make sure other students are occupied with academic tasks. This sends the message that this is a conversation – not a confrontation, that you are calm and un-rattled, and that no one will be dissuaded from learning.

Address the child’s behavior, not the child. Specifically describe behavior: “You’re looking through your pencil bag. Please zip it up and put it in your backpack.”

- Don’t forget, it is okay to step away from the situation for a moment, take some breaths, keep the class rolling on academics, and keep yourself calm. Try not to get caught up in a power struggle.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Here are some things to keep in mind each day that are effective preventions to possible power struggles and classroom conflict:

- Create an inclusive classroom – encourage creative thinkers and elicit different opinions.

- Create opportunities for students to work together to solve academic and social problems. Each student has something to learn from and teach to every other student.

- Build positive relationships, learning what it looks like when students are upset and what may be going on outside of the classroom. Learn what students are interested in and incorporate these into classroom activities. Use these tips to get to know your students.

- Treat each day like a new day. Allow yourself and students a fresh start.

- Allow for student choice, when appropriate. Students will learn to be better decision-makers and feel that they have control over their day-to-day activities. They are less likely to engage in power struggles in an attempt to gain control. Use this template to create a class motto.

- Praise students for positive behavior. Specifically describing the positive behavior, try to achieve a 4:1 ratio of praise to correction.

- Strive for consistency between students and among staff.

Let’s rewind and return to Mrs. Pedroza’s classroom when students first began entering her 7th grade Social Studies class. The teacher is standing at the door, welcoming students.

“Good morning, Taylor.”

“Hi,” Taylor curtly says as she shuffles to her desk with her head down.

Mrs. Pedroza welcomes three other students by name, taking note that Taylor is acting differently than normal. The bell rings and Mrs. Pedroza walks around the room, monitoring as students work on their bellwork. She pats a couple students on the back to let them know they’re doing a good job. Most students are settled in and working on their bellwork. Taylor is digging in her pencil bag.

Mrs. Pedroza walks over and bends down to talk one-on-one with Taylor. “Hey, Taylor. How’s it going?”
Taylor looks up from her pencil bag and sighs, “Fine, I guess. But I can’t find my favorite pencil and my twin sister was being a butt this morning.”

“That’s frustrating. I’m sorry you guys had trouble. But could you find a nicer way to say that, please,” and she smiles.

Taylor smiles, “Well...she was annoying.”

Mrs. Pedroza smiles, “Fair enough. That can be a frustrating start to the day. Let’s see what we can do to start this class off well. We do have some bellwork on the board. What can we do to get you started so you can get the most done now without having to spend other time doing it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you like to get a drink of water first? Or do you want to go ahead and choose a pencil from your pencil bag and get started?”

“It’s fine. I’ll just get started.”

“Very good. I’m going to send in attendance. I’ll be back around and see what a great job you’re doing getting started on this work, okay?”

The teacher goes to the computer and submits attendance. From across the room, she sees Taylor’s pencil bag is on the desk and it looks like Taylor has begun the assignment. Mrs. Pedroza catches Taylor’s eye, nods her head and gives a small smile. Taylor gives a half-smile and gets back to work.

Sometimes the difference is in the small things and how we approach situations.