

# How to Manage Passive-Aggressive Behavior in Your Classroom

## An Interview with Signe Whitson

Randy: This is start of the recording for a conversation about Managing passive-aggressive Behavior in your Classroom. Have you ever had to respond to a student who will move into slow motion when you ask them to complete a task? Or have you ever had that student who kind of smiles to your face but does everything they can to undermine what you're asking them to do as well as your authority behind your back? It feels almost like they're hiding behind a mask. They're purposely trying to really get under your skin, push you to the edge and they're very, very good at it.

Well, this is what could be described as passive-aggressive behavior. So I'd like to introduce you to a professional, a colleague of mine who may be able to help you in your classroom. So Signe Whitson is the Chief Operating Officer or COO of the Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute. She's also the author of many books, including a book called The Angry Smile, which focuses on passive-aggressive behavior.

My name is Dr. Randy Boardman and I'm with the Crisis Prevention Institute. And my title right now is Senior Training Advisor. So if you want practical and effective strategies to help manage passive-aggressive behavior in your classroom, and be excited to come back the next day, please join us for what we're going to call a conversation about managing passive-aggressive behavior in your classroom. So with that Signe, can we start by you telling us about you, your professional background, and a little bit about where your interest and expertise about managing and working with passive-aggressive behavior comes from? Over to you, Signe.

Signe: Well, first let me say, thank you. It's an honor to be part of this podcast today. So thank you so much for inviting me to take part in this conversation. I've spent the better part of the last 18 years working with young people and

their families. And all kinds of mental health issues and especially those related to de-escalating crisis situations, helping kids manage anger. And as you said, changing passive-aggressive behavior. Through my work force as a therapist in a residential treatment center and now as a school counselor and, of course, with the Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute, I have had many, many opportunities to see what a destructive force that anger can really be. Both when it's expressed in uncontrolled aggressive ways which gets our attention right away. But also when it's acted it out in these more highly controlled but hidden behaviors which is really the hallmark of passive aggression. And so, my work on *The Angry Smile* is really all about efforts to teach people, how to express and respond to anger, really how to be angry in constructive and relationship affirming ways.

Randy: It sounds like you've been around this topic for quite a bit and you too work with troubling young people. So I'm thinking that a good place to move forward or get started with the conversation is to, if you could maybe place within context or a working definition around what is passive-aggressive behavior? Some examples of what it looks like in the school setting, what it sounds like. And some practical examples that educators that are listening today could relate to. Can we go there?

Signe: Sure, absolutely. In *Angry Smile* text, we define passive-aggressive behavior as a deliberate but covert way of expressing feelings of anger. And we say that passive aggression is really motivated by a person's fear of expressing their anger directly.

In other words the passive-aggressive person really carries a belief that his life is only going to get worse if other people know about his anger. And so, he expresses his anger indirectly. Passive aggression really involves a variety of behaviors that are all designed to get back at another person without the other person recognizing the underlying anger. So in the book, we'd point out that the passive-aggressive person seems to really get some genuine pleasure out of frustrating other people. And it's for this reason that we call the pattern of behavior, *The Angry Smile*. So, Dr. Boardman, you asked what passive-aggressive behavior looks like and feels like. Well, I'll tell you this, if your interactions with a child, a parent, a teacher, a student, a coworker, your boss,

or even a spouse, give you the feeling that you were just on an emotional rollercoaster going up and down all of the time. Chances are good, you are dealing with a passive-aggressive person.

Some specifics, some of the most common red flags include things like withdrawing and insulting rather than honestly stating opinions or needs. Passive-aggressive people tend to use words like “fine” or “whatever” to shut down any type of disagreement. Another hallmark is that passive-aggressive people love to procrastinate or carry out tasks inefficiently or ineffectively. They give lip service to doing things differently in the future, while knowing that they really don't plan to ever change their behavior. And really the ultimate red flag of passive-aggressive behavior is that the passive-aggressive person really causes other people to eventually blow up, and in a sense act out the anger that the passive-aggressive person has been silently harboring.

Randy: Very interesting. I focus on the word, I heard the word deliberate. And it just reminds me so often when I'm working with training and teachers, I'll talk about, some folks that we work with are highly trained professionals. They get very, very good at what they do. And they're very good at, as I say, getting under our skin, into that passive aggression can show up from students and families and perhaps here and there even some adults in the workplace. Why don't we try to steer this conversation today to the student side of it and if this goes really well, maybe we'll have you come back and talk about where it shows up in families or even with coworkers at a later day.

So, let's start with or continue the conversation a little bit about where it comes from, it comes from a place of anger and it sounds like young people don't quite know how to display that or share that appropriately. And why the students use this strategy to manipulate and play with us as adults.

Signe: So in The Angry Smile text, we dedicate two full chapters to looking at your question really, to exploring specific reasons why individuals display passive-aggressive behavior. And surely there's various reason of course. But what they have in common is that these young people grow up with a set of developmental conditions that make the hidden expression of anger really feel

like their only tenable choice. So I think for the purposes of this discussion, let me lay out two distinctions for you. First, we know that some young people are raised in families where they know they will be met with harsh physical punishment or retribution if they express any type of dissatisfaction or unhappiness or disagreement or anger of any type at authority figures.

So these are the kids that walk on eggshells around angry, aggressive, authoritarian adults. And they learn very quickly that their only safe option is to hide their true feelings of anger. Lest they put themselves literally in harm's way. At an entirely different extreme, there are kids who grow up in families in which social status means everything. So I'm talking about the new house with the white picket fence and the two point three children and the dog and everything is perfect. And these families put a lot of stock in making it seem that way. So in this type of environment the normal natural human emotion of anger ends up being subordinated to appearances and kids in these types of families are socialized to believe that anger equals bad and that good kids would never show their anger.

So even though these two types of environments seem very opposite, what they have in common is that both types of kids learn that open, honest, direct expression of anger is completely unacceptable. But the key thing that we all know is that these feelings don't just disappear. Because someone told kids that these feelings were bad or unacceptable. Instead, they tend to resurface through patterned but subtle misbehaviors or passive-aggressive behavior such as carrying out chores incorrectly, pretending not to hear their name when they're called. All kinds of minor but chronic frustrations for the authority figures in their lives.

Randy: Okay. I'm thinking of the presentation that I sat in that you did last summer at a conference about The Angry Smile. I recall you talking about five categories or five characteristics of behavior. Where I'd like to go with the next series of questions, if it works for you, is maybe walk through each one of those five and starting with temporary compliance and tell us a little bit about what characterizes that behavior, how to recognize it and then most importantly something pretty practical about, "So, what could I do with that if I recognize

that or I see that in my school, in my classroom or if I'm trying to get young people to do something I ask them to do?" Okay?

Signe: Yeah, absolutely. So as you said in the book, we identify five distinct and increasingly pathological levels of passive-aggressive behavior, ranging from the everyday to the truly troublesome. And we call the first level temporary compliance, because at this level the passive-aggressive person verbally agrees to a request from an authority figure. But they behaviorally delay completing it. So, for example in a classroom setting, a teacher may ask students to work quietly at their seats on an assignment, typical request. And for most students this is very ordinary, not met with any particular emotion. But for the passive-aggressive students, they may feel angry and resentful at having to complete the assigned task for whatever reason. And their response instead of to express their anger openly is to nod affirmatively when the teacher makes eye contact. But find every excuse in the book not to actually complete it.

So, it may be that the students have to sharpen their pencil or they have to get up and go to the bathroom. They ask to get a drink of water. They ask the teacher a thousand questions about the assignment. Or maybe worst of all they serially distracts the students that are around them. And every time this passive-aggressive student is redirected by the teacher, he has some sort of plausible excuse. He was thirsty. He didn't understand. His pencil wouldn't write. He had 10 glasses of water with his lunch and he needed the bathroom. Whatever it may be, there always seems to be some sort of rationalization or justification.

When the teacher begins to catch on or realize that this is not just a student having a bad day but really these excuses are sort of a chronic way of responding to unwanted tasks, that's what she should understand that this behavior is really a form of level one passive aggression. So, the important question, what can a teacher do about it? Teachers have truly all kinds of options for dealing with passive-aggressive behaviors in their classroom. And I hope I can get and many of them today. But the thing I want to start with is having the tool of early recognition and just really knowing what they're dealing with.

We always say that the real danger of passive-aggressive behavior is that it sneaks up on adults. And just sort of quietly accumulates as this series of minor but irritating behaviors. And then suddenly the student makes one more plausible excuse, one more delay. And suddenly the teacher finds herself or himself at the limit of their patience. And they raise their voice, they start handing out punishments right and left. And basically they reveal in front of the whole class that they have lost control of their emotions. And the passive-aggressive student on the other hand is sitting there cool as a cucumber fully in control of their emotions and having succeeded in frustrating their teachers and getting them to act out the anger that the child themselves had been hiding. So, I give long and quick answer to your question is that recognizing the telltale signs of passive-aggressive behavioral before getting caught up in them is really a key strategy for any adult.

Randy: So, learning more about those and better understanding that I am picking out the other end of the rope, I'm kind of getting caught. And I'm setting up a situation or a student wins who's showing the behavior and I lose in front of everybody else. I'm suddenly having all kinds of flashbacks to names of students I worked with who are, there are probably things I did incorrectly over the years to do set some of that up. Perfect. Very practical, good...I like those examples.

Well, let's take a look at the second category. And if I remember from the notes I took or the handout that I have in front of me from our session, the next was the intentional inefficiency. So boil that down to some examples, how to recognize it and what do I do about it if I have that happening to me in my classroom?

Signe: Sure. So, as you said, we call Level Two, Intentional Inefficiency. Because in this level, the passive-aggressive person verbally complies with the request. But unlike in level one, they actually do carry it out but they do it in such a way that is purposefully below expected standards. So, if we take this same classroom example again and the student we talked about before, this time he or she may decide to get started on the assignment right away. But this time they use completely, illegible handwriting or they turn in an assignment and it's ripped and torn or they turn in such nonsensical responses that it is clear that

they are defying the teacher's authority. So, it's very frustrating as you mentioned in your history, it's frustrating to most teachers, most adults. But one of the best ways that we can cope with level two passive-aggressive behavior is to make it a point to set crystal clear expectations at the start of any assignment or chore. That way, if a student turns in sloppy, careless, ripped, intentionally substandard work, the teacher can refer back to the expectations that were stated at the beginning of the assignment and then redirect the child to better their work.

Though, the one caution I offer though, is that teachers have to be careful to manage their own emotions in response to the passive-aggressive student. And not to become so frustrated that they begin to use passive-aggressive behaviors in return. In the book we call this phenomena Counter Passive Aggression. But it's really sort of mirroring the behavior of the passive-aggressive person. And for example, one of the traps I've seen adults fall in, is that if a student is handing in substandard work, the teacher starts to set expectations so high that it becomes impossible for the student to actually hand in anything that actually would be acceptable.

Randy: Good stuff. I like where we're getting. And let's go to the third level, which is called Letting a Problem Escalate. And again, examples from school settings, how do we recognize it and again what can I do about it if anything as a teacher?

Signe: So at this third level of passive-aggressive behavior, what we find are really crimes of omission. So in other words, it's not so much what the student does. But what the student doesn't do that creates a problem. So for example, I worked with the 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. And she felt like she wasn't able to talk to him directly about her feelings but she made a conscious decision that she was going to show him. So that afternoon, this particular teacher's class was being observed by the school principal. And the teacher started to have trouble with this technology. First, he couldn't find the remote control to advance the slides in his PowerPoint and then he couldn't get the speakers to work so that he could play a video for the class.

The student told me that she could clearly see him becoming flustered and humiliated in front of the principal. And part of her was really enjoying sort of watching him squirm. The student told me that she had seen his PowerPoint remote fall into his briefcase earlier in the day. But she made a choice not to say anything. And she also knew that the outlet he was using for his speakers had burned out. But again, she decided not to tell him what she knew. But rather to sit in her seat and be silently satisfied, feeling like his embarrassment was really sort of a quid pro quo for the humiliation he had got her.

So what can adults at this level with this kind of behavior that's particularly hard to identify. I always say that level three passive aggression is particularly frustrating. It's like trying to nail jello to a wall. Because the student can legitimately say, "I didn't do anything." And often it's very difficult for an adult to prove otherwise. But in this kind of situation, what I say is that the adults' best choice is to maintain calm and to be role models for his students on how to cope with situations that are difficult or frustrating or anger-inducing. By not losing their cool, by not blaming other people or panicking. But staying calm and looking for solution. The teacher plays a really important role in showing young people how to be angry in productive ways.

Randy: I know the word that I key in off of that conversation is the passive-aggressive behavior being conscious and purposeful, and they know exactly what they're doing. And they know how it's affecting us as adults. Yeah, pretty interesting. Let's go to the fourth level and at least according to my preparation here in my notes, we're talking about hidden but conscious revenge. Why don't you take it from here?

Signe: Sure. At level four, the passive-aggressive student is no longer withholding behavior. But they are really quite actively seeking ways to get this hidden but conscious revenge on the object of their anger. There are really a lot of funny examples of level four passive-aggressive behavior. My favorite little story to tell is the one about the wife who was so angry at her husband for refusing to help her with the house project. Because he really wanted to spend his day watching football on TV. That she left their home for the day to go



shopping with the TV remote control in her purse. And she said that that was the best way that she could get back at him in a legal manner.

If anyone cared to try the internet literally abounds with memes that show funny instances of hidden revenge. And it's true that the lengths that some people go to to hide their anger really can be quite funny. But the truth is that level four passive aggression can also be very serious and very destructive. This year, we are coming out with the third edition of *The Angry Smile* text. And one of the new areas we're exploring is the role that technology plays in passive-aggressive behavior. Especially at this level, because we're looking at how young people are extremely savvy at covertly lashing out at others from behind the cover of a screen or a keyboard. And in the book, I share several real life examples of passive-aggressive behavior online. Including a student whose anger toward her high school science teacher motivated her to set up a fake social media account in his name and post in there saying rumors and even Photoshopped images that put his career in real jeopardy. So yes, this case was an extreme example. But it's also too common among tech savvy kids who have found new ways to act out their anger with these hidden methods.

Randy: Or they may could do the same to other kids, the whole cyber world is such a vicious world, your other area of expertise is in bullying. And cyber bullying is just an amazing new, very, very difficult area to get our heads around. So good example, keep going. Sorry, I interrupted you.

Signe: Oh, nope, that's okay. I'm glad you pointed that out. The cyber bullying is exactly, its level four passive-aggressive behavior in action.

Let's talk a little about what adults can do. And an example I just gave you with fake social media account was set up, legal action was actually taken by the school and the teacher against the student in the form of a civil lawsuit. And again, the student's behavior was really at the extreme edge of passive aggression. But nonetheless, I think a keynote for all educators and adult is that, first it's important to take away any gratification that a student gets from his passive-aggressive behavior. And in many ways that ends up being taken away the audience. And second, it's also critical to establish logical and sometimes legal consequences for their behavior.

I think when these things can be done in a professional way where the adult conveys intolerance for the behavior while still showing acceptance and understanding of the student's emotions that were underlying the behavior. We start to see the beginning of the end of the need for anger to be expressed in these destructive but hidden ways.

Randy: Okay. Or they find that it's not being successful for them, they're not getting the payback they're looking for?

Signe: Exactly.

Randy: Okay. All right. Let's go to the fifth level. And this is a tough one, this is self-deprecation. Can you talk to that a little bit more?

Signe: Sure. So the final level is labeled self-deprecation because of passive-aggressive student is so fixated on getting back to a specific person that he or she is actually willing to behave in self-destructive ways that lead to their own personal rejection or alienation. As an example, I knew a student who was raised in a family, who is very authoritarian. And as part of their ethnicity and their culture, in this family, young people were never permitted to openly argue with their elders. And respect in particular for a father's authority with absolute. So, the parents of this family had deemed that their daughter would go to medical school and become a doctor. But this girl was very creative and wanted to go to art school. So, rather than dare, openly assert her wants, her future dreams to her parents, she purposefully failed all of her science and math classes in high school and sabotaged her own college applications. So as to be certainly rejected from all of the universities that her parents preferred.

So, young people who are willing to cause this kind of serious lasting harm to themselves through passive-aggressive acts need adults to recognize their behavior for what it is. And that ability to really see that there's pain behind all these destructive behaviors is critical in preventing further riskier self-

deprecation from occurring. At Level five, really we're talking about a pattern of pathology that requires professional intervention.

Randy: Okay. That's pretty serious kind of stuff. Some of the folks that are listening today may also be thinking what I'm thinking but as you're talking, it's hard not to jump into some adults in some workplaces over the years or even family members. Briefly touch on that, you said it's coming in a revised edition of the book but talk on just briefly about passive-aggressive behavior in families or workplaces. Just in case anybody else out there like me have bumped into, in those settings.

Signe: Sure. So any in *The Angry Smile* we devote entire chapters to each subject. So, for your listeners who are just looking for more information on passive-aggressive behavior at work or among family members, rest assured, it's brightened in the book and it's in the online course. But for the purposes of the time we have here, I think it's important to just know that one of the main dangers of the development of chronic passive-aggressive behavior is over-generalization. So, as I mentioned earlier there are specific reasons why some young people choose passive-aggressive means of anger expression. And in the families they grew up with, there were these developmental conditions that they were raised in, hiding anger probably was their only safe choice. But as these young people turn into adults, they overgeneralize the style and apply it to most authority figures. Acting out this pattern again and again, whether it's at work or it's with family members.

Randy: So they're no longer kiddos anymore but the behavior worked for them at one time and it resurfaces.

Signe: You got it.

Randy: So, wow. Good stuff. All right. We're going to go a lot like bingo. I'm going to give you a free space, so one more chance to offer any secret or idea about managing passive-aggressive behavior in schools. So, this one's free space on you, go ahead.

Signe: Well, I'm actually trying to make strategies for coping with passive aggression, the worst kept secret in the world. So I'm happy to reveal what I know, especially about changing this behavior in the long term. In *The Angry Smile*, we really guide readers through a six-step process that we call benign confrontation. And this is sort of an ordered way of approaching passive-aggressive behavior and helping adults unmask the hidden anger of a passive-aggressive person. And then help that person begin to understand how destructive this pattern of anger expression can be.

One of the things I really like is that instead of this being sort of in your face, authoritarian type of approach that breaks a person down. Benign confrontation really builds a person up by strengthening the relationship, by increasing self-awareness, by modeling skills for assertive anger expression. And by helping kids find areas of competence. So, I can tell you with all honesty, it's a strategy I use regularly with my students. And it's one that I think is really invaluable.

Randy: Excellent, excellent, fabulous. I, again, want to thank you for sharing your time and your insights and giving us practical classroom types of strategies that's where I'm going. So I want to provide to our listeners to deal with this behavior. And again, our intent to do this podcast for listeners is to not make it a commercial but to learn more about passive-aggressive behavior. But at CPI, we do now carry the book, *The Angry Smile*. So for anybody that's out there associated with us as instructors, feel free to check it out on our product's page online. You hinted early and I just briefly want to touch on it, a three-hour online course that recently CPI and Life Space Crisis Institute have developed an agreement where our customers, our instructors, our educators can get access to that through our online course, through our website. So it's a series of nine online modules, I've watched you, I've done work with other online pieces. And Signe is incredibly engaging and much like over the phone, very practical, usable strategy. So additional resources for anybody that's listening in an area that is tough on all of us.

So also if anybody wants to check in with me, talk to me, I can refer you to some other directions, I'm Dr. Randy Boardman, email is

rboardman@crisisprevention.com. Feel free to get a hold of me. Anything else you want to add to put a wrap on it, Signe?

Signe: Nothing else that I want to add. Just thanks again for having me be part of this conversation. I enjoyed it.

Randy: All right. We thank you very much. Good luck to the listeners with the current school year. And thanks to each and every one for that are out there that keep making big differences and little differences along the way with the students that you work with. Thank you very much and have a great day.