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Discipline

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

In this overview chapter on discipline, originally written 20 years ago, we explore both out-of-school and in-school causes of discipline problems. Sadly, the out-of-school causes that we originally wrote about have only worsened, and new ones have emerged. In 1988, the year of first publication, there had been no Columbine or Virginia Tech shootings. The staggering 18,000 acts of television violence witnessed by children as they entered adolescence have since grown to hundreds of thousands. The frequent “subliminal” messages of sex and violence purveyed through print and electronic media are now so overt that our airwaves are filled with violent and sexually exploitative television shows, movies, words, actions, titles, and video games. Although *Father Knows Best* was a thing of the past even in 1988, we were still a long way from Fox’s *Who’s Your Daddy?* There was no Internet back then offering chat rooms filled with whatever you want, whenever you want it, or blogs from people spouting any crazy message.

For all the legal advances we have made in gender, racial, and sexual preference equality, the problems of bullying are at least as bad as they have always been and have even taken new forms, such as cyberbullying. Segregation, while illegal for many years now in the United States, seems more the norm than the exception when it comes to schooling. Although we have known for many years of the correlation between socioeconomic status (SES)

Foundation of the Program

If we allow ourselves to become helpless in the face of the many causes of misbehavior, it becomes very difficult to teach. Discipline with Dignity is designed to help the teacher work effectively with children despite these numerous problems. The 12-step plan that follows is a guide for teachers. Each step represents specific things educators can do to ensure the success of their students, help prevent discipline problems, and intervene when disruption does occur.

1. Let students know what you need, and ask them what they need from you. Most teachers only do the first part. It is easy for us to tell them what we need. However, the best teachers also ask students what they need.

2. Differentiate instruction based on each student's strengths. If a student is acting out, assume that this is his defense against feeling like a failure because he cannot, or believes he cannot, handle the material. If you are unable or unwilling to adapt your teaching style to lower or higher academic levels based on the student's needs, then you should not be surprised when that student is disruptive.

Just as expectations that are too high lead to frustration, those that are too low lead to boredom and the feeling that success is cheap and not worthy of effort. When we make learning too easy, students find little value in it and little pride in their achievements. It is important to increase the challenge without increasing the tedium.

3. Listen to what students are thinking and feeling. There is probably no skill more important than active listening to defuse potentially troublesome situations. For example, Denise says, "Mrs. Lewis, this lesson is soooo boring. I hate it." A "button-pushed" response would be "Well, maybe if you paid more attention and did some work once in a while, you'd feel differently." A better response that defuses might be "I hear you, and I'm sorry you feel that way. Why not give me a suggestion or two that will help make it better? Please see me right after class."

positive things. Tell them you trust they will respect the sub and help keep everyone else on task.

Example of a Social Contract

Holly Sanford, an intermediate-level art teacher, developed a social contract including monitoring and merits to improve discipline in her overcrowded art classroom. Her goals were to cut down on students moving around the classroom, talking while working, and bickering over materials. The idea was based on the children's natural inclinations to choose a leader. She sees her classes for a 13-week cycle, with each class period approximately 40 minutes long. The art room is set up with six tables that seat five students each. Figure 4.2 identifies the class process that gives students much responsibility in looking after their own and each other's behavior. Figure 4.3 identifies consequences.

Figure 4.2
Monitoring System Contract

1. Each table group will have a monitor who is in charge of getting materials, distributing them, supervising behavior according to the classroom rules, collecting materials, and cleaning up.
2. To get started, the monitor is voted on by the members of the group based on his leadership qualities, dependability, or whatever other qualities the group feels constitutes a good leader. Every two weeks, somebody new with the next-closest birthday will become the monitor.
3. All members of the group must cooperate with the monitor.
4. The monitor must fulfill the duties and responsibilities of his position.
5. After an assignment is given, nobody but the monitor may leave his seat. All questions that any group member has must first be asked of the group. If nobody knows the answer, the monitor may approach or send the student to the teacher.

Ms. Evans: No. He's 8. That's what some 8-year-olds do.

Consultants: I know. But what he said and did was inappropriate. Didn't it make you the least bit upset?

Ms. Evans: No. He's 8. That's what some 8-year-olds do.

Consultants (a bit disbelieving): So you didn't get the least bit upset?

Ms. Evans (smiling): Not the least bit. He's 8. That's what some 8-year-olds do. And besides, no 8-year-old can make me mad unless I let them. And I'm not giving Taniq that kind of power.

By knowing what “some 8-year-olds do” before they do it, Ms. Evans was able to handle this situation in a respectful and dignified way. She did not get upset or angry and was not the least bit stressed-out by this event. Ms. Evans summed up the key to not getting stressed by stating simply, “He's 8. That's what some 8-year-olds do. No 8-year-old can get me mad unless I let them.” Some children swear, others are rude, a few are forgetful, some won't be able to sit still for very long, and others will struggle to understand the material. Having an idea of what they are going to do before they do it helped Ms. Evans and can help you when working with this type of class.

We believe the images that create stress are a mind-set. It is in the head. It is part of the imagination. It is not real unless we let it become real. Some children are good at causing stress, but only because they know exactly what to do and say to push our buttons. But since predictability works both ways, we have to be a step ahead of our students. We can know what they are going to do to try and stress us out and then be sure not to show the least bit of stress, anger, or anguish. Instead, we can smile and say, “I'm smiling because I knew you were going to say that. If you want to get the reaction you're looking for, get to class on time, bring your books, and be polite. I promise then I'll be shocked!”

Several strategies offered in Chapter 8 are appropriate for students with these needs, such as integrating exercise throughout the day and teaching students better self-control. Whenever possible, these strategies should be offered as suggestions that leave room for the student to give input as well.

Classroom Management Strategies for Students with Excessive Energy

Many regular education students also benefit from these ideas, but they are particularly appropriate for students with excess energy. The next section describes strategies that are oriented more toward students with communication or social issues.

- *Velcro*. Glue or tape a two-inch strip of Velcro underneath a student's desk or chair with the rough side accessible. Suggest to the student that when the need to get out of her seat arises, she should first rub the Velcro. The stimulation of movement is usually all a student is seeking, and rubbing the Velcro often helps fill this need.

- *Use of keyboards*. Students who have trouble writing things by hand are often more productive at a keyboard. Simply reduce handwriting requirements by giving them the opportunity to do their work on computers, both at home and in class.

- *Swimming noodles*. Have you ever seen the long Styrofoam noodles children use to float with in the pool? Slice a noodle into three sections (one noodle works for three different students). Place a section at the feet of students who move their legs a lot, and allow them to roll it back and forth. Because the noodle is Styrofoam, it doesn't make any noise when rolled.

- *Portable office*. Our dear friend Marylin Applebaum, of Applebaum Associates, suggests making a "portable office" to help distractible students. Simply take two file folders to create a three-sided screen for the student's desktop. The student now has a comfortable work area that blocks distractions.