

WHAT DO I DO WHEN . . . ?

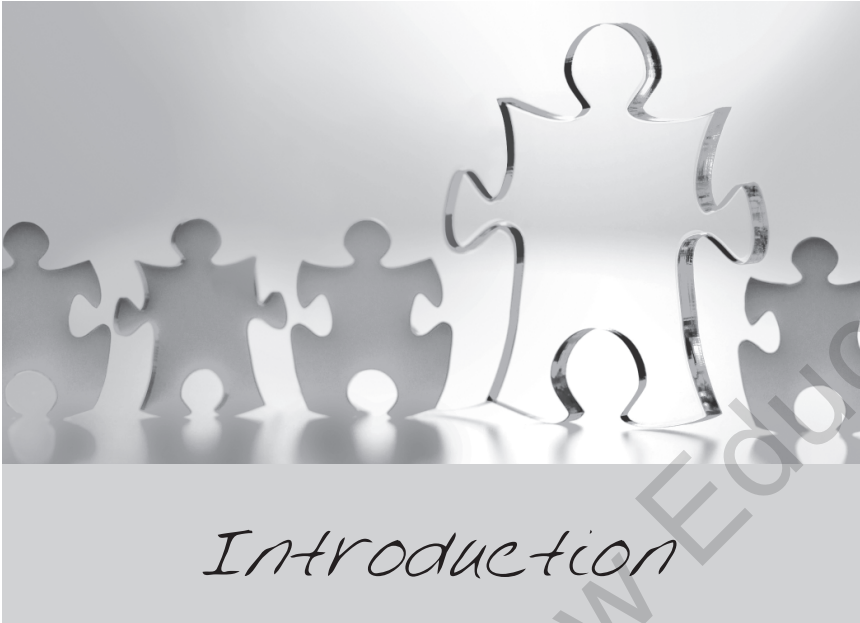
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In the book *Discipline With Dignity*, Rick Curwin and I sought to provide educators with the information needed to deal both effectively and humanely with children. Our focus was to show how the enhancement and preservation of a child's dignity are always essential. We highlighted the differences between consequences and punishments; showed the relationships among stress, motivation, teaching methods and discipline problems; offered alternatives to lose-lose power struggles; and attempted to address ways of effectively engaging the difficult-to-reach learner who acts out frequently. The response to our work has been extremely gratifying and has given us many opportunities to help educators and schools create and implement Discipline With Dignity programs throughout the United States.

This book reviews and updates the principles upon which *Discipline With Dignity* is founded. It summarises the key methods and describes some new approaches to difficult behaviour. It answers many "What do I do when ... ?" questions about how the program can be applied in different situations.

When I was in year three, my teacher took exception to something I had done. All I can really remember is this big person coming at me angrily, pinching me up by my cheek and scolding me while

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hauling me to the front of the room. I can still feel the humiliation, embarrassment and hatred to this day. Mrs McLean robbed me of my dignity that day, and I still have not forgiven her. There is little else I remember about primary school other than how my teachers treated me.

Schools and teachers still largely rely on some variation of Mrs McLean's punitive obedience model of discipline, which says, "Do it my way or else!" Behaviour modification techniques are essentially sophisticated ways of manipulating others to do as we wish. The authority either rewards or punishes the behaviour he or she wants to "shape". Unfortunately, in all such programs, children are unlikely to internalise the values that underlie the desired behaviours. In the best-case scenario, students act appropriately in the presence of the rewarder/punisher. They become dependent upon others to tell them what to do and how well they did it. Rarely do these programs teach children to become responsible for what they do and for what kind of people they are.

Most children who grow up to become teachers were not discipline problems in school. Most were taught to respect authority whether right or wrong. Since teachers were to be respected, they were imbued with power, and even those who were mean and uncaring were listened to for fear of retribution or punishment. Those who did not obey were often publicly scorned and held up for daily ridicule. I will never forget "Stackler", a skinny, forgetful, disorganised classmate in year four who seemed to be the object of daily verbal abuse by the teacher. As I watched him endure his daily torture, I remember learning to keep my mouth shut, pay attention and take absolutely no risks in that class. Since many of us grew up obeying, we tend to expect the same from kids nowadays. When they do not do as we want, we tend to feel helpless, and then we become more punitive, figuring that we have to get tough with the kids in order for them to obey. Many of us become a current version of Mrs McLean. The tougher we get, the more resistant our at-risk students become.

Introduction

Exasperated, we seek help from parents or administrators. When they do not cure the child of his or her disobedience, we get mad. After about 10 years, many of us have trouble getting out of bed in the morning with any energy to keep going. Some turn the anger against themselves and become depressed, while others become cynical, critical and dehumanising for self-protection.

What we must realise is that, while obedience models of discipline always had a down side, in today's world they simply no longer work. The only kids who behave as a result of obedience methods are those who have respect for or fear authority. And most of them will eventually stop obeying unless they feel respected by those in authority. Kids who lack respect for authority find no reason to behave just because the teacher says that they should.

The problem is that many of us do not know specific ways to replace our obedience methods. The frustration is shared by John Mackovic, a football coach at the University of Illinois, who has said that, years ago, a coach could invariably seek compliance by eyeballing a player and exclaiming:

“Go over and stand in the corner!”

But with increasing numbers of kids not automatically respecting or fearing the coach, Mackovic proceeds to offer alternatives, none of which is particularly effective:

“Please stand in the corner.”

“How about if you went over and stood in the corner.”

“How about us talking about you standing in the corner.”

“Why don't I go over and stand in the corner for you!”

We must realise that, in our culture, most of us no longer respect others just because of their title or role. It is rare to find citizens who unflinchingly respect their politicians. Even religious leaders are suspect following recent scandals. Nowadays, to be successful in a position of authority requires an ability to connect in a caring way by inspir-

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ing hope within others and by leading one's own life in a manner that models the message. We live in turbulent times in which there are few norms. The existence of a multicultural milieu, with children being raised in every imaginable family structure, requires that the contemporary teacher have an almost incomprehensible mix of firmness, love, patience, understanding and flexibility. Never has it been more urgent that we understand the basic needs that motivate children's behaviour so that our styles and strategies may adequately address the diversity that is today's norm.