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Self-Control



There never has been, and cannot be, a good life without self-control.

— Leo Tolstoy

Each day, thousands of students come to school lacking the basic social skills needed for responsible behavior. They argue. They bully. They fight. They are unable to describe their feelings, check their anger, or control their impulses. Like rudderless boats tossed about on a rough sea, these children are unable to steer a course through their stormy emotions. Their inadequate academic skills add to their frustration and, in turn, to the turmoil they create in the classroom. Forty years ago, teachers harried students about gum chewing, running in the halls, and staying on the school grounds during recess. Today's teachers face students whose sense of the 3 R's is rage, resentment, and revenge.

No child is born violent. It takes many bad experiences to turn a youngster into a hostile student. For example, a developmental history of abuse or neglect is a strong predictor of violent behavior. Parents beating children, kids witnessing violence, and children selling their bodies for rent money sound like subplots in a horror story. Unfortunately, these are everyday events that fill the lives of many children, and the effects cause havoc in classrooms (see Figure 1.1). Consider the following scenes:

Eight-year-old Sylvia lives out of a paper sack. Each week she is shuttled from one relative to the next. When her teacher asks for homework, Sylvia yells, "F-- k you!" and runs out of the classroom. Sylvia is truant half the school year; and when she is in school, she is sleepy most of the time.

Joshua is 9 years old. His cherubic face hardens like fast-drying cement when the principal confronts him with a stash of twenty-dollar bills recovered from his locker. "Whoa man, I work the streets hard for my money," he whines as he slumps in a chair, tears running down his cheeks.

Daniel, age 15, believes his manhood rests on his ability to earn respect with his fists. "Like that f---ing boy disrespected me. So I punched him in the mouth. If he had kept his mouth shut, he would not of had my fist in it and he wouldn't have his teeth knocked out sucking on gauze right now." (Way, 1993, p. 5)

An entertainment industry that glorifies violence, grinding poverty that breeds crime, and inadequate parenting all contribute to irresponsible behavior. Just as there is no single cause, there is no single treatment. All segments of a youngster's life must be touched in order to quell the tidal wave of disruptive behavior that threatens public school classrooms.

For their part, schools can develop proactive classroom management systems that emphasize social skill development. This is not a new, add-on responsibility; schools have always required that students conform to specific rules of conduct. Teaching proactive social skills advances the traditional theme of fostering compliance to helping students develop their emotional intelligence.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence refers to an individual's ability to monitor emotions and weigh alternatives before acting. Daniel Goleman (1995) explains the relationship between emotional intelligence and social skills:

Those who are at the mercy of impulse—who lack self-control—suffer a moral deficiency: The ability to control impulse is the base of will and character. By the same token, the root of altruism lies in empathy, the ability to read emotions in others; lacking a sense of another's need or despair, there is no caring. And if there are any two moral stances our times call for, they are precisely these, self-restraint and compassion. (p. xii)

Emotionally intelligent individuals control their feelings, rather than letting their feelings control them.

Impulsiveness in childhood is a forerunner of aggression in adolescence and it undercuts social skill development. The Pittsburgh Youth Study tracked the delinquent careers of 1,517 boys for more than a decade. Researchers reported that impulsive judgment and impulsive behavior—more than any other individual trait such as IQ—were significantly and positively related to delinquency (Browning & Loeber, 1999). When Shoda, Mischel, and Peake (1990) tracked the developmental progress of impulsive 4-year-olds into adolescence, he found their lives filled with difficulties. They were easily frustrated. They

FIGURE 1.1: AT-RISK FACTORS OF YOUTH IN THE UNITED STATES

- Over 900,000 children were confirmed victims of abuse and neglect in 1998.
- Black and Native American children are significantly over-represented among abuse and neglect victims—double their proportion in the national population.
- Three to ten million children witness family violence each year.
- Young children are most at risk for being abused and neglected. Infants represent the largest proportion of victims; almost 40% of victims are under age 6.
- A history of family violence or abuse is the single most significant contributor to delinquency.
- Children who witness domestic violence may display the following symptoms: sleep disorders, headaches, stomach aches, diarrhea, ulcers, asthma, enuresis, and depression. Such complaints are identified as reactions to stress.
- Children of women who are battered have high rates of poor school performance, truancy, absenteeism, and difficulty concentrating.
- Children who witness domestic violence experience symptoms such as anxiety, aggression, temperament problems, depression, low levels of empathy, and low self-esteem. Lower verbal, cognitive, and motor abilities are also documented as symptoms in children who witness domestic violence.
- Juveniles make up 71% of all sex crime victims reported to the police.
- In 1998, firearms killed 10 children every day. Of these, 2,184 were murdered, 1,241 committed suicide, and 262 were victims of accidental shootings.
- Between 1979 and 1998, gunfire killed nearly 84,000 children and teens in America—36,000 more than the total number of American soldiers killed in Vietnam.
- Not all children exposed to violence suffer significant harmful effects. Resilient factors include a protecting family member, a caring teacher, and supportive peers. Resilient factors also include a child's internal capacity to cope with stress.

Compiled from *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*, by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (1999) and *A Month of Mental Health Facts: Fact-of-the-Day*, by the New York University Child Study Center (2001).

were combative and unable to keep friends. A young person who is unable to control the impulse to strike out, either in fear or anger, is a walking powder keg. Almost half of the boys identified as bullies in elementary school will have adult felony records by age 24 (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Impulsive behavior is a survival mechanism that has been passed down to us from our ancient forebears. During the Paleolithic Era, an impulsive reaction could mean the difference between life and death. Making quick judgments and leaping to action was the best way to eat and avoid being eaten. The biological root of impulsiveness is located in the amygdala, a bundle of small almond-shaped glands near the base of the brain. The amygdala acts like a switching device. It instantaneously evaluates input from the senses and either forwards signals to the frontal lobe of the neocortex for further scrutiny or mobilizes the body for immediate response. The structure of this neural alert system is unchanged from the time our ancestors dressed in animal skins and slept in caves. Fate and the speed of cultural change have placed us in a fast-paced, complicated world with the brain of a cave dweller as our guide. Everyday life is filled with challenges to emotional intelligence. Frustrations, misunderstandings, and disappointments test our abilities to stay in control. Thinking before acting or speaking is the crux of emotional intelligence.

Emotional circuits may be configured by nature, but they are cultivated by experience. Practiced consideration helps to strengthen the neural pathways between the amygdala and the frontal lobe. For young people who are raised in households or neighborhoods where abrupt and hostile reactions are common, the neural track between the amygdala and the frontal lobe becomes the path least traveled. The amygdala kick-starts an impulsive youngster into action without regard for the consequences. Daniel Goleman (1995) calls this an “emotional hijacking.” An atavistic reaction to a perceived threat elevates, rather than reduces, danger by turning impulse into aggression. An often-cited reason for aggressive behavior is a “knee-jerk” reaction to a perceived slight.

Acting out aggressive behavior characterizes three-quarters of students placed in special education programs because of a behavior or emotional problem (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Impulsivity not only characterizes the behavior of many youth with mild disabilities, but it also influences how they think about themselves and the world around them. Rather than reflecting on how their impulsive behavior hurts others, aggressive youth rationalize their actions. These rationalizations distort their ability to put their behavior into a proper social perspective. They are unable to see their actions from any point of view other than their own. This “me-centeredness” plays a critical role in their low emotional intelligence. Students with behavior disorders in particular utilize self-serving thinking patterns to rationalize their behavior. These “cognitive distortions” serve as a sort of character armor, keeping at bay the slings and arrows of reality.

In the early 1990s, a female jogger was beaten and raped in Central Park. When interrogated by the police about their motive, the confessed attackers

explained that they were “wilding” (i.e., having fun). Several of the youth pointed out that it was the jogger’s fault she was attacked, because she should have known better than to be in the park during the evening. Such cognitive distortions twist reality into self-serving observations about victims (Henley & Long, 1999). Thus, a car is stolen because “he was stupid to leave the keys in the ignition”; a deliveryman is killed because a teen wants a new pair of shoes.

In her article “Do Conduct Disordered Gang Members Think Differently?” Beverly Lewis (1992) described the “errors in criminal thinking.” Included among the rationalizations for their actions, aggressive youth blame their victims, and cite causes outside their control, such as poverty and insults (e.g., being “dissed”). Aggressive youth follow their own line of misguided logic, and their egocentric explanations are bereft of social conscience. Such children are delayed in their emotional intelligence. They maximize the fulfillment of immediate physical needs and desires, and they minimize their responsibility for their actions.

The absence of a comprehensive mental health system in this country, coupled with the staggering number of children (one in five) who grow up in poverty, presents a challenging picture for those who care about the social and emotional welfare of young people. In September 2000, Surgeon General David Satcher convened a national conference on children’s mental health in Washington, D.C. Experts agreed that at best only one-half of young people with emotional problems receive professional help. Steven Hyman, Director of the Institute of Mental Health, implored educators to give students’ mental health as much attention as their academic performance: “In education, cognitive development has been emphasized. In contrast, social and emotional development has been pushed under the rug . . .” (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000, p. 1). An appropriate educational response is needed to help at-risk students before they develop serious social and psychological problems.

TEACHING SELF-CONTROL

Although disruptive youngsters demonstrate a range of behavioral and emotional problems, it is their lack of self-control that causes the greatest difficulty in school—both for themselves and for their teachers (Goleman, 1995). Traditional discipline strategies do not work with students whose life histories have hardened them to threats and punishment. These students present a challenge to the most sanguine teacher. The meager doses of discomfort doled out by school discipline codes barely make a dent in these students’ armor-plated personalities. Confront them and they fight back. Punish them and they grow resentful. Suspend them and they are back on the streets, where they continue to relearn all the wrong lessons for getting along in life.

What is a teacher to do when confronted with students who lack basic social skills for controlling their behavior and getting along with others?

The solution is simple and direct: *teachers can do what they do best—teach.* The same skills that teachers bring to mathematics, reading, and science can be incorporated into a social-skills curriculum that builds self-control. Self-control can be taught directly through lessons and activities, and it can be taught indirectly through routines, discussions, and a cooperative classroom climate.

Not long ago, I was speaking at a teacher conference when a teacher objected, “Teaching self-control sounds fine,” she said, “but I have my hands full teaching math, reading, and everything else. Now you tell me I should be teaching social skills as well. That’s the family’s job, not mine.” I welcomed this comment because I believe this teacher was speaking on behalf of many who feel overwhelmed. Such imperatives as “raise achievement scores,” “establish inclusive classrooms,” “respect multicultural issues,” and “keep your classroom under control” seem overwhelming. The implication is that teachers should conjure a formula for solving society’s problems. With the pressure of so many expectations, why should teachers accept the additional burden of teaching students self-control?

Teachers do not have to start teaching self-control—they already are doing it. Self-control is a hidden curriculum in every public-school classroom. Classroom management, which goes on every moment of every school day, is permeated with hundreds of mini-lessons about self-control.

The problem is that much of this incidental teaching is unfocused. Its potential is lost because of a lack of clarity about the specific social skills that constitute self-control.

WHAT IS SELF-CONTROL?

In many classrooms, the most visible indicator of a self-control curriculum is the list of class rules taped to the wall. The problem with this traditional practice of posting rules to guide behavior is apparent only when one examines teachers’ expectations for how their students should act. As an illustration, let’s examine two different scenarios:

In Ms. Whitney’s classroom, rules remind students not to talk, to raise their hands if they want help, and not to get out of their seats without teacher permission. Compliance is the prized behavior. Students who break the rules get their names written on the blackboard, and a check is made after their names following each subsequent misdeed. If students accumulate more than three checks in a day, they have to serve detention at the end of the day for punishment.