

# "Discipline with Dignity": Beyond Obedience

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**W**HEN my daughter, Lisa, was a young preschool child, I (Allen Mendler) had my first "stranger danger" and "private parts touch" conversation with her. I had difficulty trying to convey my concern and felt distressed while making the effort to explain things to this person whom I love more than life itself.

On the one hand, I wanted to preserve her wonderful, fun-loving naiveté. On the other hand, I needed to introduce her to life's more subtle dangers, without overwhelming her.

Afterward, as I reflected upon the discussion, I thought how sad but necessary it was to engage this topic. The major thrust of my message for Lisa was *not* to blindly trust or obey adults, including those who appear to be nice. I may as well have included educators among those who may appear trustworthy but who require caution nonetheless.

The real dangers in our society that necessitate such discussions send a message to children that they should *not* simply obey those in positions of authority. With messages like this, is

it any wonder that even "good" students look for sensible reasons before they do as they are told?

In most schools and classrooms, so much of what we call "discipline" gives children the message that they will be punished for not doing what they are told. Those who follow the school rules are viewed as responsible and gain access to classroom rewards and privileges, while those who do

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not are seen as defiant. Noncompliant students face time-out, detention, loss of privileges, a phone call home, or a zero on assigned schoolwork.

While these methods may have a place within an overall discipline plan, they are rarely effective in changing behavior. In fact, many children are unaffected by time-outs or staying after school. Some even perceive these interventions as rewards, a safe haven from street dangers or a quiet space to complete work, socialize, or get attention.

In our work with teachers, we find that, although most agree in principle to move away from obedience-

**Models of discipline which are based on responsibility require teaching students the skills of decision making and providing opportunities to see appropriate behaviors in action from good role models.**

model techniques, they fear that there are no good replacements for them. The interventions that we recommend are more difficult and time-consuming than obedience-based programs. However, in the long run, both the teacher's and students' lives are easier when students become self-disciplined.

Responsibility-based models of discipline differ most from obedience-

based models in how consequences are selected and implemented. Obedience models utilize punishments as deterrents, creating fear that something bad will happen when rules are broken, and providing rewards for doing what is expected. Unfortunately, too often, punishments and rewards are ineffective when no one is present to administer them.

Such systems unwittingly teach students that rule breaking is okay as long as they do not get caught doing it. Rewards "hook" children into thinking there should be something in it for them for being good. The long-term result is more poor choices with more misbehavior underground, as students improve their skills in avoiding detection.

Responsibility models, on the other hand, require teaching students the skills of decision making and providing opportunities to see appropriate behaviors in action from good role models. We find that more students actually change their behavior when they are given instruction on how to behave in the future, rather than simply being admonished for behaviors in the past. When students show they can behave under some but not all conditions (i.e., in the classroom but not in the cafeteria), instruction should focus on how to make better decisions in that particular environment.

In addition, all educators can benefit from watching their own behavior; in dealing with students, other faculty, and administrators, teachers should see if they model the behavior they want from students. For example,

when teachers are angry with students, they need to express that anger in the same way they want students to express anger with their classmates.

Stanley Coopersmith's work in self-esteem provides a good model that educators can use to develop approaches, techniques, and strategies needed in developing responsibility in youth. He found that students with high self-esteem had four factors in their family backgrounds that distinguished them from others: warmth, clearly defined limits, a democratic atmosphere, and opportunities for practice in decision-making and problem-solving skills. The continuous presence of these four characteristics in classrooms and other youth-serving organizations can make a big difference in helping young people make responsible choices.

**Warmth.** Good teachers have always done things to make their classrooms welcoming places. Nowadays, these basic human touches have become essential to encouraging acceptable behavior and setting the tone for responsible learning.

Most important is a caring attitude that conveys the message, "I want you here; I'm not giving up on you even though I get frustrated with your irresponsible, disruptive, or unmotivated behavior. Your place is here!" Simple gestures can get the message across: greet students at the door, share moments of appreciation with them, know who they are by embracing their interests, send a thoughtful note, highlight their effort (even when it has been minimal), use humor, listen, and welcome their feedback.

**Clearly defined limits.** Students need secure, confident, respectful adults who are appropriately confrontational when student behavior crosses the line. Within the classroom, each teacher needs to emphatically support values of nonviolence, caring, cooperation, and respect.

Classroom rules and consequences for breaking them must support these values. For example, the principle "School is a place where all students have a right to learn in an environment that is free from discrimination" leads to rules regarding proper use of verbal and written actions.

The most effective and respected teachers express their beliefs, demands, and expectations within the context of clear values and goals that benefit learning. They hold students accountable by expressing approval and disapproval, and they seek consequences that teach each student a connection between what they have done and what happens as a result of those actions.

**Democratic atmosphere.** Much of our work is based on finding ways to give students a real stake in their learning. We have long advocated involving students in the process of making classroom rules and guidelines.

Students may be encouraged to develop expectations for the teacher that they think will help them learn. They can be involved in developing specific rules that will apply to each other. They can be invited to propose consequences or corrective actions that may be explored if rights are violated. Responsibility is learned by

practicing it in ways like these—making choices and experiencing consequences.

**Skills in recognizing and resolving conflict.** Every conflict that occurs in our presence gives us an opportunity to reinforce a solution or teach an alternative response. Most of the time, a private message works best because it preserves everyone's dignity.

When a power struggle occurs, teachers can use "I-messages" to share information about their perspectives, feelings, and needs. After a blow-up, genuine remorse and empathy can be taught while offering an apology, making restitution, or developing a plan. Letting go of anger firmly yet respectfully is powerful.

For example, the day after a power struggle, a teacher could tell a student, "You and I had a tough time yesterday. I felt upset and so did you. But I am happy you are back and I want a fresh start. We both can make each other's day a little better. Welcome." The best way to show corrective behavior is to model it.

### **A Teacher Reflects**

When all four of these characteristics are present in classrooms, educators can truly affect learning and shape behavior. The words of Jorge Alemo, a teacher in San Antonio, Texas, attest to the power of this kind of teaching:

"As a kid growing up in West San Antonio attending a 99% Hispanic school, I respected the teacher who provided a positive attitude with fair discipline. I respected the teacher who disciplined me and respected me.

"I was very shy back then, but I was full of pride. I would think positive things, but I would keep them to myself. To teachers who were disrespectful, I would give the silent treatment. I did not like being yelled at or made to feel inadequate.

"[Now that I am a teacher,] I respect and acknowledge the existence of my students each day. I model the respect that every human should expect. I seek to learn from them.

"In conducting my class, I follow the guidelines of retail management. I believe that every teacher should be a salesperson. The classroom is a store. In order to make a sale (or teach), the students must understand the information, like what they hear and see, and be able to picture themselves with a better life because of what they have learned."

We believe that classrooms are far more important and necessary than stores. If shoppers are not finding what they need, they can leave to visit another store, but there are few legitimate educational options for kids. When they exit prematurely or are exiled, it is often to a low-paying job, welfare, a gang, jail, or premature pregnancy.

The school needs to be an all-purpose department store with numerous selections that appeal to a broad consumer base. While the selections may look, sound, and feel different, they must all share common characteristics: warmth, clearly defined limits, and a democratic atmosphere, while teaching students the skills necessary to recognize and resolve conflict in responsible ways. **ED**