

Teaching Children to Be Discipline Problems

It is easy to create classroom discipline problems. By following the ten simple rules listed below you should be able to substantially improve your skill at this popular teacher pastime.

1. **EXPECT THE WORST FROM KIDS.** This will keep you on guard at all times.
2. **NEVER TELL STUDENTS WHAT IS EXPECTED OF THEM.** Kids need to learn to figure things out for themselves.
3. **PUNISH AND CRITICIZE KIDS OFTEN.** This better prepares them for real life.
4. **PUNISH THE WHOLE CLASS WHEN ONE STUDENT MISBEHAVES.** All the other students were probably doing the same thing or at least thinking about doing it.
5. **NEVER GIVE STUDENTS PRIVILEGES.** It makes students soft and they will just abuse privileges anyway.
6. **PUNISH EVERY MISBEHAVIOR YOU SEE.** If you don't, the students will take over.
7. **THREATEN AND WARN KIDS OFTEN.** "If you aren't good, I'll keep you after school for the rest of your life."
8. **USE THE SAME PUNISHMENT FOR EVERY STUDENT.** If it works for one it will work for all.
9. **USE SCHOOL WORK AS PUNISHMENT.** "Okay, smarty, answer all the questions in the book for homework!"
10. **MAINTAIN PERSONAL DISTANCE FROM STUDENTS.** Familiarity breeds contempt, you know.

We doubt that teachers would deliberately follow any of the above rules, but punishments are frequently dealt out without much thought about their effects. In this article we suggest that many discipline problems are caused and sustained by teachers who inadvertently use self-defeating discipline strategies. There are, we believe, several simple, concrete alternatives that if followed will work to reduce classroom discipline problems.

EXPECT THE BEST FROM KIDS

It has long been known that teachers' expectations play an important role in determining student behavior. One author remembers two teachers who, at first glance, appeared similar — both were very strict, gave mountains of homework, and kept students busy from the first moment they entered the classroom. However, they differed in their expectations for students. One seemed to say, "I know I am hard on you, but it is because I know you can do the work." She was effective and was loved by students. The other conveyed her negative expectations, "If I don't keep these kids busy they will stab me in the back." Students did everything they could to live up to each teacher's

expectations. Thus, by conveying negative attitudes toward students, many teachers create their own discipline problems.

A first step in reducing discipline problems is to demonstrate positive expectations toward students. This is relatively easy to do for "good" students but probably more necessary for the others. If you were lucky, you probably had a teacher or two who believed you were able and worthy, and expected you to be capable even when you presented evidence to the contrary. You probably looked up to these teachers and did whatever you could to please them (and possibly even became a teacher yourself as a result). Now is the time to return the favor. Expect the best from EACH of your students. Assume that EVERY child, if given the chance, will act properly. And most important, if students don't meet your expectations, DON'T GIVE UP! Some students will require many treatments before they will begin to respond.

MAKE THE IMPLICIT EXPLICIT

Many teachers increase the likelihood of causing discipline problems by not making their expectations about proper behavior clear and explicit. For example, how many times have you heard yourself saying, "Now class, BEHAVE!?" You assume everyone knows what you mean by "behave." This may not be a reasonable assumption. On the playground for example, proper behavior means running, jumping, throwing things (preferably balls, not rocks) and cooperating with other students. Classroom teachers have different notions about proper behavior, but in few cases do teachers spell out their expectations carefully. Sad to say, most students must learn the meaning of "behave" by the process of elimination — "Don't look out the window. . . Don't put hands on fellow students. . . Don't put feet on the desk. . . don't. . . don't. . ."

A preferred approach would be to present rules for proper conduct on the front end (and try to phrase them positively — "Students *should*. . ."). The teacher (or the class) could prepare a poster on which rules are listed. In that way, rules are clear, explicit, and ever present in the classroom. If you want to increase the likelihood that rules will be followed, have students help make the rules. Research indicates that when students feel ownership for rules, they will make greater effort to live by them.

REWARDS, YES! PUNISHMENTS, NO!

A major ingredient in the creation of classroom discipline problems is the overuse of punishments as an answer to misbehavior. While most teachers would agree with this statement, recent research indicates that punishments outweigh rewards by at least 10 to 1 in the typical classroom. The types of punishments identified include such old favorites as THE TRIP TO THE OFFICE, and "WRITE A MILLION TIMES, 'I will not. . .'" But they also include the almost unconscious (but frequent) responses made for minor infractions: the "evil eye" stare of disapproval and the countless pleas to "Face front," "stop talking," "sit down!" and so on.

Punishments (of both the major and minor varieties)

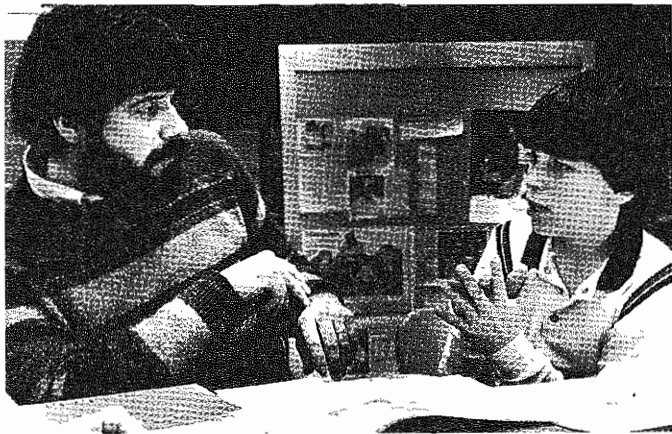
have at least four consequences that frequently lead to increased disruptiveness in the classroom 1) Punishment brings attention to those who misbehave. We all know the adage, "The squeaky wheel gets greased." Good behavior frequently leaves a student nameless and unnoticed, but bad behavior can bring the undivided attention of the teacher before an entire audience of classmates! 2) Punishment has negative side effects such as aggression, depression, anxiety, or embarrassment. At the least, when a child is punished he feels worse about himself, about you and your class, or about school in general. He may even try to reduce the negative side effects by taking it out on another child or on school equipment. 3) Punishment only temporarily suppresses misbehavior. The teacher who rules with an iron ruler can have students who never misbehave *in her presence*, but the moment she leaves the room or turns her back, misbehavior quickly returns. 4) Punishment disrupts the continuity of your lessons and reduces the time spent on productive learning. These, taken with the fact that punishments are usually not premeditated (and frequently do not address the real problems of misbehavior such as boredom, frustration, or physical discomfort), usually work to increase classroom discipline problems rather than to reduce them.

In view of these factors, the preferred approach is to use rewards. Rewards bring attention to *good* behaviors: "Thank you for being prepared." This provides an *appropriate* model for other students, and makes students feel positive about themselves, about you and about your class. Also, reinforcing positive behaviors *reduces* the inclination towards misbehavior and *enhances* the flow of your lesson — you stay on task, get more student participation, and accentuate the correct responses.

LET THE PUNISHMENT FIT THE CRIME

When rewards are inappropriate, many teachers create discipline problems by using short-sighted or ineffective punishments. The classic example is the 'whole class punishment' — "Okay, I said if *anyone* talked there would be no recess, so we stay in today!" This frustrates students (especially the ones who were behaving properly) and causes more misbehavior.

Research indicates that punishments are most effective



when they are the natural consequences of the behavior. For example, if a child breaks a window, it makes sense to punish him with clean-up responsibilities and the expense involved with replacing it. Having him write 1000 times, "I will not break window" or doing extra math problems (!) does little to help him see the relationship between actions and consequences.

In reality, this is one of the hardest suggestions to follow. In many cases, the "natural consequences" are obscure ("Okay Steve, you hurt Carlton's feelings by calling him fat. For your punishment, you will make him feel better.") So, it is often difficult to find an appropriate punishment. We suggest, after racking your brain, that you consult with the offenders. They may be able to come up with a consequence that at least *appears to them* to be a fit punishment. In any case, nothing is lost for trying.

IF YOU MUST PUNISH, REMOVE PRIVILEGES

In the event that there are no natural consequences that can serve as punishments, the next best approach is to withdraw privileges. This type of punishment fits in well with the actual conditions in our society. In "real life" (located somewhere outside the school walls) privileges and responsibilities go hand in hand. People who do not act responsibly quickly lose freedoms and privileges. Classrooms provide a great opportunity to teach this lesson, but there is one catch: THERE MUST BE PRIVILEGES TO WITHDRAW! Many privileges already exist in classrooms and many more should be created. For example, students who finish their work neatly and on time can play an educational game, do an extra credit math sheet, work on homework, or earn points toward fun activities and free time. The possibilities are limitless. The important point, however, is that those who break the rules lose out on the privileges.

"IGNORANCE IS BLISS"

One of the most effective ways to create troubles is to reward the very behaviors you want to eliminate. Many teachers do this inadvertently by giving attention to misbehaviors. For example, while one author was observing a kindergarten class, a child uttered an expletive after dropping a box of toys. The teacher quickly surrounded him and excitedly exclaimed, "That's nasty! Shame! Shame! Don't ever say that nasty word again!" All the while the other kids looked on with studied interest. So by lunch time, many of the other students were chanting, ". . .(expletive deleted). . ." and the teachers were in a frenzy! Teachers create similar problems by bringing attention to note passing, gum chewing, and countless other minor transgressions.

Such problems can usually be avoided by ignoring minor misbehaviors and, at a later time, talking to the student individually. Some minor misbehavior is probably being committed by at least one student during every second you teach! Your choice is to spend your time trying to correct (and bring attention to) each one *OR* go about the business of teaching.

CONSISTENCY IS THE BEST POLICY

Another good way to create discipline problems is to be inconsistent with rules, assignments, and punishments. For example, one author's daughter was given 750 math problems to complete over the Christmas holidays. She spent many hours (which she would rather have spent playing with friends) completing the task. As it turned out, no one else completed the assignment, so the teacher extended the deadline by another week. In this case, the teacher was teaching students that it is alright to skip assignments. When events like this recur, the teacher loses credibility and students are taught the habit of procrastination that will probably haunt them throughout their lives.

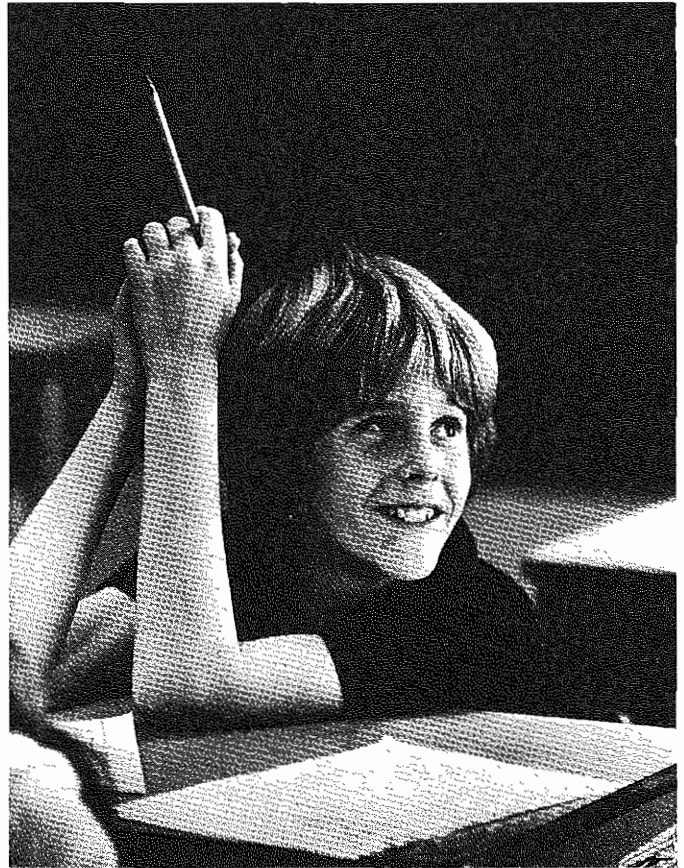
Inconsistency with punishment has a similar effect. By warning and rewarning students, teachers actually cultivate misbehavior. "The next time you do that, you're going to the office!" Five minutes pass and then, "I'm warning you, one more time and you are gone!" And later, "This is your last warning!" And finally, "Okay, I have had it with you, go stand in the hall!" In this instance, a student has learned that a punishment buys him/her a number of chances to misbehave (he/she might as well use them all), and that the actual punishment will be less severe than the promised one (not a bad deal).

To avoid the pitfalls of inconsistency, mean what you say and when you say it, follow through.

KNOW EACH STUDENT WELL

Discipline problems can frequently be caused by punishing students we intended to reward and vice versa. When a student is told to clean up the classroom after school, is that a reward or punishment? It's hard to tell. As we all know, "One person's pleasure is another's poison."

One author remembers the difficulty he had with reading in the fourth grade. It made him so anxious that he would become sick just before reading period in the hope that he would be sent to the clinic, home, or anywhere other than to "THE CIRCLE." One day, after helping the teacher straighten out the room before school, the teacher thanked him with, "Mark, you've been so helpful, you can be the first to read today." The author made sure



he was never "helpful" enough to be so severely punished again.

The opposite happens just as often. For example, there are many class clowns who delight in such "punishments" as standing in the corner, leaving the room, or being called to the blackboard. The same author recalls having to stand in the school courtyard for punishment. He missed math, social studies and English, and by the end of the day had entertained many classmates with tales of his escapades.

The key for reducing discipline problems is to know your students well; know what is rewarding and what is punishing for each.

USE SCHOOL WORK AS REWARDS

One of the worst sins a teacher can commit is to use school work as punishments. There is something sadly humorous about the language arts teacher who punishes students with, "Write 1000 times, I will not. . ." or the math teacher who assigns 100 problems as punishment. In cases like these we are actually punishing students with that which we want them to use and enjoy!

Teachers can actually reduce discipline problems (and increase learning) by using their subjects as rewards. This is done in subtle and sometimes indirect ways, through making lessons meaningful, practical, and fun. If you are teaching about fractions, bring in pies and cakes and see how fast those kids can learn the difference between $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{8}$. Reading teachers should allow free reading as a reward for good behavior. Math teachers can give extra





credit math sheets (points to be added to the next test) when regular assignments are completed. The possibilities are endless and the results will be less misbehavior and a greater appreciation for both teacher and subject.

TREAT STUDENTS WITH LOVE AND RESPECT

The final suggestion for reducing discipline problems is to treat students kindly. It is no secret that people tend to respond with the same kind of treatment that they are given. If students are treated in a cold or impersonal manner, they are less likely to care if they cause you grief. If they are treated with warmth and respect they will want to treat you well in return.

One of the best ways to show you care (and thus reduce discipline problems in the long run) is to surprise kids. After they have worked particularly hard, give them a treat, "You kids have worked so hard you may have 30 minutes extra recess." Or have a party one day for no good reason at all. Kids will come to think, "This school stuff isn't so bad after all!" Be careful to keep the surprises unexpected. If kids come to expect them, surprises lose their effectiveness.

Recently, one author heard a student pay a teacher the highest tribute. He said, "She is more than just a teacher; she is our friend." Not surprisingly, this teacher is known for having few major discipline problems.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When talking about reducing discipline problems, we need to be careful not to suggest that they can or should be totally eliminated. When children are enthusiastic about learning, involved in what they are doing, and allowed to express themselves creatively, "discipline problems" are apt to occur. Albert Einstein is one of numerous examples of highly successful people who were labeled discipline problems in school. It was said of Einstein that he was "the boy who knew not merely which monkey wrench to throw in the works, but also how best to throw it." This led to his expulsion from school because his "presence in the class is disruptive and affects the other students." For dictators and tyrants, robot-like obedience is a major goal. For teachers, however, a much more critical objective is to help a classroom full of students reach their maximum potential as individuals.

The theme of this article has been that many teachers create their own discipline problems. Just as we teach the way we were taught, we tend to discipline with the same ineffectual methods that were used on us. Hopefully, by becoming aware of this and by following the simple suggestions presented above, learning and teaching can become more "rewarding" for all involved.

M. Mark Wasicsko
Steven M. Ross