

Chapter 1. Core Beliefs and Principles

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- This chapter provides a thorough summary of the *Discipline with Dignity* model which focuses on creating a plan with students to help them with their decision-making abilities.

Managing student behavior is not easy. It requires a delicate balance between meeting the needs of the group by maintaining social order and meeting the unique needs of each student. Few choices work for all teachers and all students. We believe the best decisions for managing student behavior are based on a value system that maintains the dignity of each student in all situations. We value responsibility more than obedience. Encouraging responsible behavior requires valuing what students think, seeking their input, and teaching them how to make good decisions. We know behavior change is slow, and it occurs in small increments. The expectation that students will change long-standing habits on demand is part of the problem. We advocate a discipline model that is highly structured yet extremely flexible—like a parent who sets clear, firm limits but also provides choice within those limits. We believe discipline should focus on teaching and learning rather than retribution or punishment. Students are the consumers of education, and school should prepare them to flourish and be responsible in choosing their own life destiny.

Core Beliefs Underlying Discipline with Dignity

Discipline is an important part of the job, and every educator must be prepared to accept that reality. We define *discipline* as the process of learning how to get along with others, to solve problems, and to make responsible choices. We believe learning and developing these skills is as important as learning content. Good manners and proper social skills continue to stand the test of time. Content changes. How many planets are in our solar system? Is drinking a glass of wine every night good for you? Answers to these questions continue to change. The value of solving problems without hurting others has been stable for centuries. Although classroom teachers are rarely the primary cause of poor behavior, they must understand that they will not find a lasting solution without owning their role in every successful and unsuccessful situation. Discipline needs to be viewed as a continuous, daily part of the job. We should not get angry with students for not

achieving desired results. Instead, we need to stabilize our feelings about the situation and figure out exactly what to do differently next time.

Students always deserve to be treated with dignity. In school, we must let students know that our goal is to always maintain their dignity. Doing so increases trust, builds relationships, and makes problems easier to solve. Treating students with dignity means we stay calm when things around us get crazy. It means we talk to students as privately as possible. It means that even when they are rude, nasty, defiant, and disruptive, we are empathetic, compassionate, and caring. Treating students with dignity means that students see their leader model the behaviors we want them to exhibit. Picture yourself at the receiving end of a discipline method to assess its impact on dignity. Can you imagine how it would feel to be scolded by an administrator at a faculty meeting or in front of your class?

School is for all students, not just the good ones. One of us once taught a class of severely behaviorally disturbed students. Frequently, other teachers asked if they could put some of their regular education students in that class. These teachers believed that if certain students were removed, the class would run much more smoothly. They might have been correct. But school is for every student who attends, not just those we want. The most troubled often need us most. If we choose to think about the situation in a different way, the best students will rarely make us better teachers. It's the ones who create difficulty that force us to expand our skills, and that makes teachers better for all students.

Embracing the journey makes the ride easier. Recently, the fully potty-trained 4-year-old son of one of us pooped in his pants. In the bathroom, Dad was frustrated and said, "Eli, you are 4 years old. It is not OK to go in your pants. You have to feel the pressure on your stomach and go right to the bathroom." If you've ever tried explaining to a 4-year-old what having to go potty feels like, you know it's not easy. A split second later, Dad had a strange experience. He felt like he was watching the interaction between himself and his boy rather than being *in* it. The thought expressed by his many friends and family members who have older children resonated: "Embrace it," they say. "Sometimes they even grab my shoulders and look me squarely in the eyes while imploring me to 'enjoy the journey. Embrace them being young right now because in a blink they are teenagers.'" Looking back at his son, who now had a tear running down his cheek, Dad's tone turned tender: "It's OK, buddy. We all make mistakes. It's fine. I promise." A moment later, the child's chin was tucked under Dad's neck as they changed his clothes. In this small experience, a (literally) crappy moment was turned into a special interaction that will never be forgotten.

Each of us has the ability to control the attitude we take to each situation and the effort we put into it. Do you embrace the journey of being a teacher, or do you allow every challenging behavior to ruin your day? Mental toughness is a very important component in working with tough students. It is not always easy, but if we are able to embrace the journey, we can enjoy the ride.

Effective discipline often requires courage and creativity. Being effective with difficult students requires a willingness to step outside our comfort zone and respond in unconventional ways. We must be open to approaches that may seem puzzling at first. For example, if you have done everything you can think of to stop a certain behavior but it continues, think of creative ways to legitimize it. If abusive language persists, ask the student to publicly define the offensive words to ensure understanding. If your students like to complain about one thing or another, have a gripe session or a suggestion box in which students are encouraged to deposit complaints that you will read later. If chronic disruptions during study hall are a problem in your school, offer a game-filled, nonacademic study hall or one that focuses on teaching social skills or job-interviewing skills in addition to one that is quiet for those who really want to study.

When misbehavior is legitimized within boundaries, the fun of acting out often fizzles. If a student escalates negative behavior to get himself removed from class, realize that removal simply reinforces negative behavior. He wants out. Instead, send him to the office for doing something good. In this way, visiting the office is a positive experience, and the administrator hears something pleasant.

Good discipline requires short-term solutions without sacrificing long-term goals. Until a misbehaving student changes because his needs are fulfilled, most strategies will only work in the short term. In the last example, a student might test for a day or two by acting appropriately to see if that gets him what he wants. If it does, he may continue to respond but rarely for very long. Unless the content is so stimulating that he *wants* to come to class, more solutions are needed. The goal is identifying the unfulfilled needs causing the behavior and then addressing these regularly through both the curriculum and interactions with the student.

Effective discipline has its own DNA. Good discipline triggers reflection and insight. It is not an action that results solely in pain or pleasure. Chaim Peri, author of *Teenagers Educated the Village Way* (2011), speaks of meaningful punishment as a process of discussion, negotiation, and agreement (DNA). For example, here are two ways to promote an apology. Consider which is more likely to foster empathy and insight:

1. "Matthew, that was a nasty, inappropriate, hurtful thing to say. Apologize to Briana right now, and I don't want to hear that again! Move your card to yellow right now" (or some other punishment).
2. "Matthew, how do you feel when someone says nasty, hurtful things to you? What would you want that person to say or do that might make you feel better? I would feel upset, sad, and maybe mad, and would want someone to apologize and really mean it. However, if you don't sincerely feel sorry, please think of a different way to make things better. What do you think?"

Real change often means sitting with a youngster who breaks rules to have a discussion. Such a discussion makes clear how the behavior is problematic for us, the others involved, or the student. It

also affords the student an opportunity to explore other ways of getting his needs met. In the second example involving Matthew, we ask him to put himself at the receiving end of what he did with the goal of helping him repair the harm he caused. We encourage but do not force the apology because we want him to do the right thing without being coerced. As soon as he takes acceptable action, we privately and passionately show our appreciation for him doing the right thing. This approach lets students see the educator as someone who sets limits with others while allowing limits to be set for him- or herself as well. Doing so encourages input from and possible negotiation with the student, promoting responsibility.

Starting fresh every day keeps optimism intact. Great athletes are often noted for having short memories. The faster a quarterback forgets an interception, the better he plays. It's also advisable to have a short memory when working with difficult students. Like primarily looking through a car's windshield to see ahead while periodically checking the rear-view mirrors to stay aware of what's behind, what happened yesterday can be informative but cannot be changed. Look forward. Leave resentments and grudges at the door. You will find strategies in [Chapter 9](#) (on managing stress) that can help you work through whatever troublesome feelings remain. If need be, acknowledge the past ("I know yesterday was tough for both of us, and I want to apologize for saying [or doing] _____."). End by looking out the windshield ("Let's talk about what we can do to make today great."). Although we may not always achieve success and improvement, we must believe that they are always possible. Each student deserves a fresh start fueled by enthusiasm, optimism, and persistence.

Basic Principles of Discipline with Dignity

Let students know what you need, and ask what they need from you. Explain to your class the kind of teacher you are and why. If you are very strict, explain what happened in your life that made you this way. For example, you might say, "In this class I will require you to walk in a straight line and raise your hand before speaking. When I was a child, I was so disorganized that now I am a lunatic in the other direction. Now you know why I care so much about walking in a straight line or raising hands." Ask students how they feel about what you told them. Many teachers do the telling part. Not as many do the asking.

Differentiate instruction based on individual strengths. When a student acts out, the behavior is often a defense against feeling like a failure. If you are unable (or unwilling) to adapt your teaching style to different academic levels based on student ability, do not be surprised when students are disruptive. Teacher expectations that are too high often lead to frustration; those that are too low often lead to students being bored and feeling that success is cheap and not worth the effort. When we make learning too easy, students find little value in it and take little pride in their achievements. Try increasing the challenge without increasing the tedium. For example, if 6th graders are required to master necessary elements in writing a story but one student doesn't understand the difference between a subject and a verb, neither writing a paragraph that contains an example of

foreshadowing (a task that is too advanced and frustrating) nor practicing the ABCs (a task that is too easy and boring) is appropriate.

Listen to your students' thoughts and feelings. Active listening potentially defuses troublesome situations. For example, when Denise says, "Mrs. Lewis, this lesson is soooo boring. I hate it," an impulsive response is "If you paid more attention and worked harder, maybe you'd feel differently." Instead say, "I hear you, and I am sorry you feel that way. Can you please tell me two things I can do to help make it better? Thanks for waiting until after class to discuss."

Use humor. Teachers are not paid to be comedians, equipped with an arsenal of jokes. But many frustrating situations can be lightened by poking fun at ourselves and avoiding defensiveness. Make sure students are not the object of any jokes. Frank, a 10th grade student obviously intent on hooking Ms. Johnson into a power struggle, announced in front of the whole class, "You are an asshole!" Keeping a straight face, Ms. Johnson responded by saying, "If you think about it, Frank, that's one body part we all have in common." The class laughed, and a tense moment was quickly defused. It is best to give a consequence or otherwise more fully explore what to do at a time that does not interfere with classroom instruction. To encourage long-term change, it is critical to understand why Frank finds it OK to talk to a teacher this way, and to know what it was that may have contributed to his outburst. (We explore these concerns in more depth throughout the book.)

Vary your style of presentation. Our observations have shown us that most older children have a maximum attention span of 15 minutes and younger children 10 minutes for any one style of presentation. After a 15-minute lecture, it may be a good idea to have a discussion for the next interval. After a large-group discussion, we could switch to small groups. Continually using the same approach creates inattentiveness and restlessness that often lead to disruption.

Offer choices. Teachers and administrators should provide as many opportunities as possible for children to make decisions. It's better to set limits before offering choice. Here are some examples: "Sitting here doing nothing during silent reading is not OK. You can choose any book from the library to read. Do you need suggestions?"

"Keeping your head down in class is not OK because it distracts me and I worry about you. If I see that happening today, will it be better if I tap you on the shoulder, whisper in your ear or [jokingly] pretend to be a waterfall?"

"When people call you names, tell them you don't like it, walk away, or ask me for a suggestion." Encouraging students to make decisions and then live with the outcome of those decisions teaches responsibility. The most effective discipline is done *with* students rather than *to* them.

Use a variety of ways to communicate with students. In addition to the spoken word, caring gestures and nonverbal messages are effective. Some students do better when they get feedback on a sticky note, in an e-mail, or on the phone. It is important to keep in mind that reports of inappropriate relationships between teachers and students are extremely unsettling and dangerous. Awareness of sexual harassment and abuse is growing day by day. Touching must never cross a

professional line. Although touch can be a very effective way to communicate caring, we understand that many educators have become wary of false accusations. Certainly, we need to be respectful of physical boundaries and use common sense. However, a pat on the back, a touch on the shoulder, a handshake, or a high-five can help form bonds with many tough-to-reach children.

Recognize that being fair does not always mean treating students equally. Systems and plans are a necessary part of teaching. They guide us so we don't have to make first-time decisions whenever something happens that is new to us. On the one hand, by predetermining consequences, we reduce the need for thinking, save time, and can blame the system if the action is ineffective. On the other hand, if we rely too much on the system, we may fail to do what is best for each individual. A system that narrowly interprets behavior ends up treating all students the same. These systems fail when a more individualized approach is required. The best systems give teachers and students choices for how to solve problems so the best solution is used. They balance predictability and flexibility. They can be fair but not always equal. Once students and parents understand the difference between "fair" and "equal," we can differentiate behavior-control methods just as we differentiate instructional strategies. You will find much more on this topic in [Chapter 6](#), where we talk about consequences.