

Up With Discipline

By Ron Morrish

Effective schools have effective discipline, a fact supported both by research and by common sense. As demands for quality education intensify, many parents are pressing for higher standards to be applied to student conduct. They are acutely aware that their children's education may be seriously hampered by the disruptive actions of other students.

Teachers share these concerns. They have the unenviable task of keeping large numbers of students focused on learning activities for extended periods of time. They are expected to teach a wider variety of skills than ever before, integrate these skills across the curriculum and meet the individual needs of exceptional students. These demands can be met only if students are responsible, co-operative and productive.

Given this level of agreement, why does effective discipline in the schools seem to be an increasingly elusive goal? Surprisingly, much of the problem may lie with discipline itself. Over the last 30 years, we have embraced "rewards and consequences" as the best means for disciplining children. This system, commonly called "behaviour management", allows adults to encourage children's good choices and discourage poor ones. So popular are these techniques that they form the basis for virtually every parenting course and classroom management program in North America. But this system, by itself, is unlikely to develop responsibility in children.

The first problem is that behaviour management fails to set limits. Employing this system, adults give messages such as "If you fight, then you will go to the office". Contrary to popular belief, this statement does not disallow fighting. Instead, it literally says, "If you don't mind going to the office, then fighting is one of the choices you get to make in this school to solve your problems!" If this is not immediately clear, think about the game of hockey. The rule says that, if you fight, you will get a five-minute penalty. Does anyone really believe that this disallows fighting? It simply presents a choice and, frequently, taking a penalty is the best option. This decision, called taking a "good" penalty, is a concept intuitively understood by children.

Offered choices, many children feel challenged to get their own way as frequently as possible. In an effort to defeat the system, they may: develop an immunity to consequences, as in "So, send me to the office — I don't care!"; become sneaky and watch for opportunities to misbehave; lie or blame others; or learn to reverse the behaviour management system, using consequences to discourage adults from making demands. The last strategy is being used more every day. Children real-

ize that, if they can make it difficult enough for us, we will be less likely to repeat such demands in the future.

The second major problem with rewards and consequences is that the behaviour management system lacks a mechanism for teaching skills. No adult would teach mathematics by punishing a child for every error. We know that skills are learned by practising the correct behaviour over and over. So why do we teach courtesy skills by punishing a child for being rude? Unless the child is being deliberately defiant, correction and review are the best responses — not punishment. When a consequence is required, it is important that the child “redo” the offending behaviour correctly. This is the teaching response.

The more that consequences are used as a substitute for systematic teaching, the more we will witness an extraordinary phenomenon, both in our schools and in our homes. The reality in today’s communities is that far too many children are destined to display their highest level of desirable behaviour in their younger years, after which they become increasingly irresponsible, discourteous, uncooperative and disrespectful. Excuses like “kids will be kids” will not help us here. The fact is that this deterioration violates one of the most fundamental principles of education, the expectation that children will improve as a direct result of the educational experience.

Imagine society’s reaction if a significant number of students deteriorated in reading and mathematics as they “progressed” through the grades. Parents would demand sweeping changes in curriculum and staffing. Teachers would demand additional resources and increased instructional time for language development and basic skills. We should be just as intolerant of any deterioration in behaviour.

Let’s get back on track and teach children to behave responsibly. There is no question that rewards and consequences are an important part of effective discipline. Their role in encouraging good choices and discouraging poor ones is indisputable. But they will never replace direct instruction, positive practice, correction and review. They will never substitute for the systematic teaching of behavioural skills.

In effective schools, students behave responsibly because they have been taught to do so. They abide by rules and comply with directions because they have been taught to do so. And they become more responsible, co-operative and productive every year, because that expectation is an integral part of the educational experience. Let’s teach children how to behave better tomorrow than they did today!

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