

DISCIPLINE

You can do it!

Lee Canter

Elaine was a fourth-grade teacher whose new class had a number of students who had been serious behavior problems in the past. She resolved not to tolerate such behavior and developed a discipline plan. She established a set of class rules under which students were to follow directions; raise their hand before speaking; stay seated; keep hands, feet, and objects to themselves; and have all work completed on time.

Consequences for breaking rules were outlined. For the first offense, the rule-breaker's name was posted on the board; second offense, a check mark was added and ten minutes of free time was forfeited; third, two checks and ten minutes; fourth, three checks, parents called; fifth, four checks, student sent to principal. A "severe clause" was also immediately involved if a disruption was considered that bad.

Positive "consequences" for appropriate behavior were also established, in which Elaine would praise students daily, send home "Super Citizen" notes each day, and reward positive behavior with marbles—150 marbles equaling 20 minutes of extra PE for the entire class.

Elaine shared the plan with her principal, who at first had concerns about how strict it was. Elaine firmly stated she could not allow her students to stop her from teaching and that she had to have firm discipline to deal with behavior problems. The principal finally agreed to the plan and then promised his support.

The first day of school Elaine sat down with her class and clearly explained her expectations. "I will not tolerate any of you stopping me from teaching, or someone else from learning . . . for any reason." She then presented her list of rules and consequences. The students got very quiet; a few asked questions such as, "What if he does it to me first?" "What if I don't feel like working?" Elaine calmly responded, "There is no excuse for not following the rules. If you choose to break a rule, you choose to suffer the negative consequences."

When she presented the positive consequences the class began to buzz with excitement. The students thought the "Super Citizen" notes were "neat," but they really responded to the idea of earning marbles for extra PE time.

Elaine concluded by telling the students, "A copy of my discipline plan will go home

to your parents, to be signed by them and returned."

The rest of the first day Elaine's students were on their best behavior. This offered her the chance to effectively reinforce them with both praise and marbles. "Eric, thank you for getting to work." "Jan, I like the way you are cleaning up." "Elissa has earned a marble for the entire class for working so quietly at her desk." At the end of the day, she gave out two "Super Citizen" notes purposely to students who had been problems in the past but were well behaved the first day.

On the second day, the "honeymoon" ended. During the morning when the students were to be working quietly at their desks, two students, Jason and Melanie, began to talk and write on each other's papers. Elaine simply wrote their names on the board. Jason yelled out, "I didn't do anything!" Elaine put a check next to his name for yelling, and he retorted, "I don't care about missing free time!" She calmly added another check and he quieted down and got to work. Throughout the day, several students continued to test her limits, and she responded to each with either a name on the board or a check. By 2 P.M. four students had checks and thus lost various amounts of free time. Jason had earned a third check; so Elaine called his mother and told her they needed to work together to make sure Jason behaved in class. It needs to be added that again, the second day, Elaine consistently reinforced those students who behaved, with praise, marbles, notes, and so on.

During the first couple of weeks, Elaine continued with her discipline plan. It became clear, though, that it was not effective with Jason. He would consistently disrupt the class and have two or three checks next to his name each day. Missing free time and calls to his mother were producing no improvement. Elaine knew she would have to develop a "severe" plan to deal with Jason. She sat down with him and told him that from then on every time he was disruptive he would choose to be sent to work alone in the back of Ms. Leader's sixth-grade class for 30 minutes. She also told him that each day he went with no disruptions he would earn a "Super Citizen" note. It took three periods of isolation in Ms. Leader's class for Jason to know Elaine meant business. He shaped up, and his behavior was rewarded with the promised "Super Citizen" notes home.

Elaine's plan had worked. And what it involved was *Assertive Discipline* in action. It's something you should try, because you simply must be able to get your needs met in the classroom. You have needs, wants, and feelings just like the children. If you require a quiet class to teach effectively, you have the right to demand quiet. If you want children to stay in their seats during work time, you have the right to demand it. If you want respect from the children, you have the right to demand they not talk back to you!

Assertive discipline is a competency-based approach to discipline, designed to provide the skills and confidence necessary to meet your needs without violating the best interests of your students. Assertive discipline does not advocate teachers storming into the classroom and "throttling" any student who opens his mouth. What it does advocate is that teachers utilize a systematic approach to discipline which enables them to set firm, consistent limits for the students, at the same time remaining cognizant of each student's need for warmth and positive support. Assertive discipline has been field tested by over 20,000 teachers and principals nationwide. These educators report that its use has reduced behavior problems by 80 percent in their classroom or school.

Why is competency-based training such as assertive discipline necessary? To be frank, you simply were not trained to deal with the classroom management problems presented by today's students. Nationwide, between 15 and 30 percent of all students exhibit emotional or behavioral problems at one time or another during the year. Over 90 percent of these problems are in regular, not special education, classrooms. Even so, nationwide less than five percent of all classroom teachers have had competency-based training in how to teach students with such problems. Research clearly indicates that in order to effectively deal with today's disruptive students, to meet your needs and theirs, you must have specialized discipline training.

Assertive, nonassertive, and hostile teachers

Assertive discipline was developed as the product of seven years of research and evaluation into effective classroom discipline skills. The basic question of the research was: How can teachers get students to behave appropriately in the classroom? To find the answer, "master" teachers were

analyzed, those who, given all the problems faced by today's teachers, are still capable of getting their students to behave. It was found that those teachers respond to their students in an assertive manner; they clearly and firmly express their wants and needs and are prepared to back up their words with appropriate actions. In other words, they "say what they mean and mean what they say."

Assertive teachers take the following stands in their classroom:

—They tolerate no student stopping them from teaching.

—They tolerate no student preventing another student from learning.

—They tolerate no student engaging in any behavior that is not in his best interest and in the best interest of others.

—And most important, whenever a student chooses to behave appropriately, they immediately recognize and reinforce all such behavior.

In other words, those teachers respond in a manner which maximizes their potential to get their needs met, but does not violate the best interests of their students.

Research also focused on what types of teachers did not respond effectively to student behavior. They were labeled *nonassertive* or *hostile*. Nonassertive teachers do not clearly or firmly communicate their wants and needs to the students, or if they do they are not prepared to back up their words with actions. They are passive or wishy-washy with students. They lack the skills and confidence necessary to deal effectively with the behavior of disruptive students. Hostile teachers get their needs met, but they violate the best interests of the students. They verbally or physically abuse them . . . or both!

The following example illustrates how the three types of teachers would deal with disruptive behavior.

A teacher wants the children to work without talking or disrupting each other. During a work period a boy puts his work aside and begins to talk loudly to the children around him.

The *nonassertive teacher* typically walks up to the boy and asks him to get to work. When he doesn't, she throws her hands in the air and says, "I don't know what to do with you!"

The *hostile teacher* storms up to the boy and yells, "You have the biggest mouth I've ever seen. Shut it—now—or you'll be sorry."

The *assertive teacher* walks up to the boy, looks him in the eye, and firmly tells him: "Stop talking and get to work im-

mediately. If you don't you will have to finish your work during free time!"

Now, here is an example to illustrate how the three types of teachers would respond when a student behaves appropriately.

A teacher has a girl who gets disruptive during transition periods between activities. The girl gets very excited, fails to follow directions, and frequently runs around the room yelling. The teacher sets firm limits, and one afternoon the girl cleans up appropriately and comes directly to the rug as instructed.

The *nonassertive teacher*—assuming a willingness to set firm limits in the first place—neither verbally nor nonverbally recognizes or supports the girl's appropriate behavior.

The *hostile teacher* typically says to the girl, "It's about time I didn't have to chase you around the room to get you to clean your things up and sit down!"

The *assertive teacher* says to the girl, "I liked the nice job you did cleaning up and following directions. You did so well you can sit on my lap and pick the story that I will now read to the class."

How you can become more assertive in your classroom this year

In order for you to become more assertive and thus more effective in dealing with behavior problems, you will need both confidence and skills.

Most teachers do not have the confidence necessary to "lay down the law" in their classrooms because they have negative expectations of their ability to deal with problem students. Many teachers (and many educators in general) have misconceptions that certain types of students "cannot" behave appropriately at school. Among the misconceptions most commonly presented are:

—The child has emotional problems. "He is just too disturbed for me to handle in my class."

—The child has inadequate parents. "Coming from those parents, how can you expect him to behave normally?"

—The child is from a low socioeconomic background. "What can you expect from a child raised in that kind of neighborhood?"

—The child is of a racial minority. "You know how 'those' kids are; there is no way to get them to behave."

—The child is educationally handicapped. "She's EH; you cannot always expect her to behave."

Those misconceptions are ridiculous. All students can behave appropriately at school. It does not matter whether children are ne-

glected, neurotic, depraved, or deprived, they still can behave. The only children who cannot behave are those with organic problems such as brain damage. Problem students can behave, they just don't want to. When they're with teachers who expect them to behave, and assertively communicate those expectations through both words and actions, those students will choose to behave appropriately. Thus, the first step to assertively dealing with children is for you to raise your expectations of your ability to deal with all students. When you do that, your confidence level will be raised as well.

Along with increasing your confidence, you must increase your skills in dealing with students with behavior problems. The following are the competency skills guidelines research and experience indicate you MUST follow in order to assertively deal with student behavior.

1. *You must know at all times what you want your students to do.* Know in observable terms the behaviors you want them to engage in. Typical behaviors teachers want from students (remember Elaine's plan?):

- Follow directions.
- Stay in seat
- Raise hand.
- Be in class on time.
- Keep hands, feet, objects to yourself.
- No cussing or teasing.
- Bring pen, books, and paper to class.

Teachers must communicate these wants to students both verbally and visually, i.e., a sign listing behaviors.

2. *You must know how to systematically set limits when students do not behave properly.* Consistency is the key to setting limits. You must provide a negative consequence for each time a student chooses to behave inappropriately. The consequence must be included in a systematic "Discipline Plan." Here are guidelines for an effective plan.

—Maximum five consequences:
First—name on board, warning.
Second—one check, 15 minutes after school.

Third—two checks, 30 minutes after school.

Fourth—three checks, 30 minutes after school and call parents.

Fifth—four checks, remove from room, goes to principal or vice principal.

—Have "severe clause" in case student severely disrupts, i.e., student immediately goes to principal.

—Principal always last consequence in the plan.

—Plan approved by principal.
—Principal and teacher must determine

what will occur when the student is sent to the principal.

—Copy of plan must go home to parents.

—Plan applies to all students in classroom.

—At the end of the day, all names and checks erased.

—Never erase a name or checks as a reward for improved behavior.

—If after three days or less the plan is not working with one or more students, make it stricter.

—Teacher should share with principal changes in plan.

Here are consequences that have proven effective with severe behavior problems.

In-School Suspension Room—Student suspended from class for remainder of day; on following day to isolation room where:

—monitored by administrator or teacher;

—student does academic work in silence;

—if student disrupts in isolation room, one to three hours of extra isolation;

—student does not participate in recess or lunch, i.e., eats alone, escorted to bathroom.

Tape Record Behavior—Cassette tape recorder placed next to student and turned on if he disrupts; tape to be played for parents and principal.

Send to Another Classroom—Disruptive student is sent to do work alone in another classroom:

—Use as alternative to sending to principal's office.

—Plan with another teacher.

—Student goes for approximately 30 minutes with academic work.

—Student sent to widely different grade level, i.e., first grader to sixth grade.

—Student sent to well-run classroom.

—Student sits alone in back of class and does work; takes part in no class activity while there.

—At end of 30 minutes, student is sent back to regular classroom.

—If student disrupts again, sent for additional 30 minutes in another classroom.

3. *You must know how to systematically reinforce the appropriate behavior of students.* Effective positive reinforcement of appropriate student behavior is the key to assertively dealing with so many discipline problems.

Verbal Reinforcement Guidelines—Give directions to students; praise two students who comply; praise every student every day.

Positive Notes Home—This is the most effective means available for a K-6 teacher to back up positive verbal responses with actions. Try at least two notes per class per day.

Classwide Reinforcement—This enables all students to earn a positive consequence for their appropriate behavior. Here is an example of an effective classwide reinforcement program, "Marbles In A Jar."

—Whenever one or more students behave, they earn a marble for the entire class.

—Each marble equals one point. When the class earns a predetermined number of points, kids get a reward such as extra free time.

—The students earn a large number of marbles each day or period.

—Class earns reward quickly; kindergarten to third grade in one day, fourth to sixth grade in one to five days.

—Reward must be something students want.

—Never take marbles out of the jar.

—At the end of each day or period, count up marbles earned and keep a running total.

—When class earns one reward start a new goal.

—Use peer pressure, i.e., no names on board earns a five marble bonus.

Thus, with all these things considered, you have an outline for an assertive discipline plan. Get to work now and develop your own plan, because you do not have to tolerate behavior problems in your classroom. If your principal questions your approach, share this article.

If you use assertive discipline in your classroom, you should reduce discipline problems. Don't ever forget, you are the BOSS in your room. You have the right to teach, and the students have the right to learn, in a disruption-free climate.

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