



How can I prevent discipline problems by offering students choices and letting them make decisions about their educations?

What can I do myself to prevent discipline problems?

What is a workable substitute for corrective discipline based on rewards and punishment?

What are natural consequences?

What are logical consequences? How do they differ from punishment?

How can I involve students in formulating logical consequences?

When we commit ourselves to the principles of a democratic classroom, we show our belief in the importance of offering choices. Offering choices can in itself be encouraging. Students begin to feel trusted when we allow them a voice in classroom policies, even in learning procedures. Similarly, students are more likely to benefit from disciplinary measures they helped tailor for themselves. If discipline is handled with the same mutual respect that characterizes other classroom activities, it can be a valuable, constructive part of our students' educations.

The most effective discipline, like the best health care, is preventive. Offering choices, getting students involved in their educations, helps reduce the occasions for misbehavior. As mentioned earlier, students can help decide matters such as the way they'll study certain subjects, the way their classroom will be arranged, the distribution of classroom responsibilities, the composition of committees and study groups, and so on. It is essential to increase interest and cooperation by letting students know we respect their opinions and will act upon reasonable suggestions and decisions.

#### An Ounce of Prevention



We can help invigorate our classrooms by breaking routines, using media, alternating class discussions with small-group and individual work, allowing students to participate in grading, and individualizing students' education as much as we can. Treating our students as unique individuals, worthy of trust and respect, creates an encouraging climate.

**Time spent on certain topics.** Let students help decide which topics they'd like to spend more time on, which ideas they'd like to pursue. If you've only allotted a week for your discussion of photosynthesis, but your students want to experiment with the process, be flexible enough to revise your schedule.

Since students don't all learn at the same rate, let them participate in establishing their own rates of learning. While Fred may take three lessons to learn how to multiply two-place digits, Carlos may learn how in one lesson. Students can be helped to discover how long certain assignments will take them.

**Ways certain topics are studied.** Involve students in devising creative ways to study. The class may want to work in small groups, see films, invite guest speakers, go on field trips, produce plays or projects, and so on.

**The order of study.** Unless some subjects demand a particular sequence, let students help decide what to tackle first, second, and so forth. If it doesn't matter to you whether they study the newspaper first or write poetry first, involve them in the decision. In self-contained classrooms, students can help decide the order of subjects they'll study during the school day.

**Methods of evaluation.** Tests, book reports, seat work, and compositions are all valid ways to evaluate learning. But consider discussing with students other, more unusual methods. For instance, see if they'd like to hold panel discussions or debates, construct murals or posters, build models, dramatize events or ideas. All these projects can tell us whether or not students have grasped specific material.

Involve them in devising different kinds of tests. Consider group tests during which the group discusses each test item but every student responds individually. Introduce take-home and open-book tests. Have students submit test questions; then use one question from everyone.

Students may fear tests less when they've helped devise them. You'll evaluate other skills besides memorization when you and your students become more creative about methods of evaluation. It's much more important to teach students how to learn than how to memorize.

**Activities and projects.** Students may want to set up a display table, do a series of drawings, create a book, take an in-depth look at a particular topic: allow them to be creative about how they spend their time.

**Committees and small groups.** Students can help decide who they'll work with on particular projects. Most of us work better with people we like than with people we only tolerate. Let them form their own groups sometimes, with your systematic guidance. For students who misbehave when they're together, offer the choice of working together or joining groups that you've chosen. Invite withdrawn students to join groups with lively, talkative students.

**Bulletin boards.** Instead of making the first bulletin board display yourself, devote one of your first class discussions to the

subject. You might say, "I thought you might like to help decide what will be on our bulletin board. What shall we display?" Open the way for students' imagination, cooperation, and involvement. Consider forming committees to take charge of each bulletin board.

**Classroom jobs.** You and your students share a classroom. You can also share the responsibilities for creating a pleasant, efficient place to learn. Discuss with students what jobs must be done: There are chalkboards to be cleaned, materials to be passed out and collected, shelves to be straightened, milk money to be collected, attendance to be taken, lab animals to be cared for, plants to be watered, and so on. Make the list together and then decide a fair way to share the jobs. Maybe jobs can rotate among class members from week to week.

**Seating arrangements.** Students can sit at tables and chairs, at desks in a circle, or double circle, or semi-circle, in small groups or large. Let students help decide the arrangement and who they will sit with. Change the arrangements occasionally.

You will have other ideas about ways to involve students in their education. Since students exercise their decision-making powers all the time — as they decide whether or not to do as you say — it makes sense to give them as many choices as possible. Developing their ability to choose will be valuable to them. You'll also be encouraging them to feel like real, contributing members of their class.

Some students, especially young students, will need more guidance than others. You may have to give them some ideas or perhaps limit the alternatives to two or three. Students may need help learning to work together. For them, you might begin with groups of two, then three, and so on; beginning with larger groups may invite chaos. But regardless of your students' experience, getting them involved can be the best possible way to ward off discipline problems promoted by alienation and boredom. For unmotivated students, offering choices can be especially stimulating. Students may take a new interest in learning when they are given a voice in their education.

### **What Can I Do Myself To Prevent Discipline Problems?**

**Vary the pace.** Everyone likes a change in routine. Varying the pace of the school day and the kinds of activities you call for can help keep students energetic and interested. Alternating discussions, use of media, exercises, small-group discussions, and independent work will avoid monotony and staleness.

**Put instructions on the board.** To avoid the payoff for attention-seeking students who continually ask for instructions to be repeated, simply refer them to the chalkboard. Use a tape recorder for students who can't read. You'll then show students that not listening will no longer capture your attention.

**Individualize instruction.** Most teacher-education courses stress individualization, but how do we do it? Several procedures have been found helpful.

1. Have a folder for each student containing individual assignments. Depending on students' ages and the subject, the folder can contain work enough for a period, a day, a week, or a whole unit. Students can get their assignments from their folders as soon as they

come to class. Assignments you've graded can be returned to the folders. In this way, work becomes more individualized and students more self-sufficient.

2. Let students help decide their grades. Before report-card time, meet with all students, discuss individual progress, and ask them to grade themselves. They should understand that the final decision is yours but have them explain the grade they chose. You'll very likely find that students will grade themselves too low, rather than too high. If your district insists on competitive grades for achievement, give students grades for effort as well. That way, the student with a C in science may have an A in the effort column.

**Establish daily free-time periods.** Since students are kept busy much of the schoolday, you can increase their cooperation by giving them a daily free period. During free time students can read, play quiet games, engage in art projects, do homework, and so on. Some may want to work on school projects or contracts. Others will need to use the time to complete work they didn't finish during the day. The consequence of misbehaving during work periods can be finishing work during free time.



Such periods are best established near the end of the day to give you and your students a chance to wind down.

**Create learning contracts.** Setting up a learning contract is an excellent way to involve students in formulating their own goals. If your district requires grades, contracts can establish grading criteria. Students and teacher decide what work will be required for the grade the student chooses to earn. Contracts can apply to a whole unit or to part of a unit. (See the following sample contract.) In ungraded systems, contracts can detail what is required for a "pass," based on each student's individual level.

#### Grade Contract

Subject: Social Studies

Student \_\_\_\_\_

Unit: Indians of the American Southwest  
during the Nineteenth Century

Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

Instructions:

You may decide what grade you wish to earn for this unit. Here are some ideas from our class discussion on how you can earn a certain grade. You may have other ideas that you want to discuss with me.

Grade of A: Four of the projects listed below.

Grade of B: Three of the projects listed below.

Grade of C: Two of the projects listed below.

Grade of D: One of the projects listed below.

NOTE: If you decide to work for a C or above, you may choose only one small-group project. The other project or projects must be individual.

1. Write a composition comparing the daily life of three Southwestern Indian tribes.
2. Form a small group and present a play about the life of one of the tribes. (NOTE: If more than one group decides to do this, each group will have to choose a different tribe.)
3. Form a small group and design a mural or a model village showing the way of life of one of the tribes. (Each group chooses a different tribe.)
4. Give an oral report on a novel about Southwestern Indians and compare the story to the facts about the way the Indians lived.
5. Make a presentation using the overhead projector on the life of a Southwestern tribe. (Each presenter will need to choose a different tribe. Tribes chosen should be different from those presented in plays or art projects.)
6. Either individually or in a small group, make a map showing the location of each tribe.
7. Answer five study questions from the text. (We will decide together which questions you will answer.)
8. Other ideas? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

REMEMBER: Your grade also depends upon quality. For example, if you decide to work for an A but your work is really B quality, you will have the opportunity to improve the work or accept a B. You and I will decide together the quality of your work.

I have read and understood all of the above. I wish to contract for a grade of \_\_\_\_\_. I will earn the grade by doing the following projects. (If you're doing a small-group project, name the other members of your group.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of  
Student \_\_\_\_\_

Last day to renegotiate \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of  
Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

Perhaps you've objected to contracts in the past. You worry that less capable students may set their sights too high, and that more capable students may try to slide through. But you can monitor contracts to prevent unrealistic or unchallenging terms. Students who work only when pressured need to take responsibility for their own learning. Your pressuring them will continue to remove that responsibility. Since contracts are renegotiable, students can revise the terms without losing face. Unmotivated students may try harder when they realize they can't get your attention or defeat you by not working, only by changing their behavior.

Contracts take time, especially at first when you must structure them precisely. But, in the long run, contracts save time and energy. You free yourself from the necessity of reminding and nagging. And you've allowed students to take responsibility for their own achievements.

Contracts are not substitutes for other activities involving the whole class, such as discussions, audiovisual programs, speakers, and so on. But you can adapt them to individual needs. They can include participation in class discussions and classroom jobs. They can lead students toward experiences you think they need, like small-group work or peer tutoring.

To simplify your evaluation of larger projects, stagger the due dates so you won't get everything at once. Collect projects in segments so you can guide students in new directions. With older students, you might assign learning partners to check each other's work.

Contracts can also be used remedially, for reluctant learners. You start where the student is willing to start and gradually increase the work. (See the following example of a remedial learning contract.)

### **Setting Up a Remedial Contract**

Mr. Muellar hasn't been able to get Patty to do any work. He's reminded her, nagged and punished her, but to no avail. She demonstrates her power by refusing to care about grades or about her parents' opinion of her apathy. Finally, Mr. Muellar decides to win Patty's cooperation by involving her in decisions that affect her. He negotiates a contract with her:

**Muellar:** Patty, we've been having problems ever since school started with you getting your work done. I've stopped nagging and reminding you because I know that doesn't work.

(He has admitted defeat, the first step in working with a power-bent student. He'll now attempt to enlist her cooperation.)

Patty, what I'm wondering is, are you willing to do any work at all?

**Patty:** Well, yeah, I guess so.

**Muellar:** Okay, let's look at the afternoon schedule. First, there's reading.

**Patty:** I hate reading. I don't read very fast and I can't keep up. And the stories are boring.

**Mueller:** Would you be willing to look through the book, pick out any story that looks interesting, and read the first three pages of it? Then would you answer a few questions I give you about those pages?

**Patty:** Any story?

**Mueller:** Yes. The first three pages of any story you choose. All right?

**Patty:** Well, okay, but what happens if I don't do it?

**Mueller:** What do you think would be fair?

**Patty:** I'd have to do it during free time?

**Mueller:** I'll agree to that. You'll read the first three pages of any story in the book and answer questions about those pages. If you don't do this during reading period, you'll do it during free time. Can we make that agreement?

**Patty:** Okay.

**Mueller:** Then let's write it out and both sign so we know what we've agreed to. Tomorrow we'll talk again to see what you want to do during that reading period.

#### REMEDIAL LEARNING CONTRACT

DATE 10/9/81

STUDENT Patty

TEACHER Mr. Mueller

SUBJECT Reading

Patty agrees to complete the following work during regular class time: Read the first three pages of any story and then answer questions about those pages.

If Patty chooses not to do this work during regular class time, she will finish the work during Free time

Patty  
STUDENT

Mr. Mueller  
TEACHER

If Patty didn't do the work during reading period, Mr. Mueller would say nothing. When free time came, he'd politely remind her of the contract and ask her to fulfill its terms. If she refused to work and didn't fulfill the terms of a renegotiated, smaller contract, Mr. Mueller might have to devise a special contract for Patty — a contract employing the logical consequences of Patty's decision not to be a student.

## A Plan for "Non-Students"



Let's say that Patty refuses to honor any contract. Mr. Mueller can show her that she has made a decision; she's decided not to be a student. So he has decided to treat her as a "non-student." (The following plan was developed by Sally Laufketter, a counselor in Ritenour School District, St. Louis County, Missouri.)

He explains that Patty will not participate in any student activity. She'll receive no assignments, remain silent during all class discussions, and stay in one classroom or in her homeroom all day. She may watch the activities but may not participate. Mr. Mueller will speak to Patty only when necessary, since his job is to teach students and Patty has decided not to be a student. He isn't interested in punishing her; he's simply honoring her decision to be a "non-student." Patty will go to the restroom and to lunch by herself. If she forgets and begins to join in some class activity, Mr. Mueller will take her aside and remind her of their agreement: "Patty, remember that you've decided not to be part of this class."

Mr. Mueller presents this plan to Patty during a conference, offering her the choice of setting up another learning contract instead. If she refuses another contract or fails to honor its terms, and if she offers no help to her teacher's "What shall we do?" Mr. Mueller explains his plan regretfully but firmly:

"Patty, you've shown that you're not willing to make any contracts for doing schoolwork. I know that I can't make you keep a contract. You don't seem to want to do the things required of students, and yet the law says you have to come to school.

"I can't control the law but I can arrange it so that you won't have to participate in anything the other students do. You won't have to turn in any papers or assignments or take part in discussions or projects. In other words, you won't have to take any of the responsibilities that go along with being a student. You'll just stop participating in school.

"The only thing I'll require is that you don't disturb others. If you decide to do that, I'll have to ask you to sit by yourself or leave the room until you're ready to stop."

They establish a time limit, perhaps three days, after which the two will have another conference. If Patty is hostile and resistant, he probably decides not to ask her any more questions. He doesn't increase her resistance by reminding her she'll be missing gym, recess, assemblies, and so on. He simply institutes the plan immediately.

After three days, Mr. Mueller meets with Patty again. He offers her another learning contract or a continuation of her "non-student" status. If her behavior indicates she's still not ready to join the class, her teacher continues to treat her as a "non-student," this time for a day or two longer than before.

This plan may require the cooperation of other teachers, the principal, and the parents. If anyone resists, explain that since nothing else has worked, you'd like to experiment with this.