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## CHAPTER 12

# DISCIPLINE AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Discipline and classroom management are two of the most important, if not *the* most, salient topics for which teachers want help. When teachers are surveyed about areas of need, they most often choose discipline and classroom management (Aldridge, 2001; Boynton & Boynton, 2005). There are hundreds of books and articles written on discipline and classroom management. However, the purpose of this chapter is to answer two very important questions. First, what do we expect or want from students? Second, how do we go about getting it? Most discipline and classroom management issues revolve around these two questions.

We know that you must be thinking, “What do you mean by ‘what do we want from students?’ ” This question is at the heart of how we go about the task of discipline and classroom management. Do we want children to obey? Behave? Think? Do we want students to sit at desks? Not talk? Interact with others? Be compliant? Although these questions might seem philosophical, they are, in fact, at the very heart of why we teach in the first place.

All these “subquestions” can be answered by considering two very broad, basic questions:

1. Do we want students to be heteronomous?
2. Do we want students to be autonomous?

These are not new questions. Piaget (1932) believed there were only two stages of moral development—heteronomy and autonomy. Simply put, heteronomy is defined as being governed by others. Autonomy is defined as being governed by one’s self. If we want students to be heteronomous and governed by others—namely us, the teachers—then the discipline plan we choose will be much different than if we believe the goal of education is autonomy.

## HETERONOMY

If we want students to comply, then we will most likely use as a major part of our discipline and classroom management plan positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and punishment (Skinner, 1974). Let's look at each of these briefly.

Positive reinforcement is most similar to "rewards." A positive reinforcer is something that, when applied following a behavior, strengthens the chance the behavior will occur again. Positive reinforcement includes primary reinforcers and secondary reinforcers. Primary reinforcers are things that children naturally need or want. For example, food and water are primary reinforcers. Children naturally want these. If we give children some candy or something good to drink after they have done something we wanted them to do, then we are applying (or giving them) positive reinforcement. Secondary reinforcers are not rewarding at first, but they become rewarding. For example, chips or tokens that can be gathered (like money) to buy a prize are secondary reinforcers. Money is a secondary reinforcer. No one was born wanting a dirty piece of green paper. However, it becomes rewarding because of what we can get with it.

Negative reinforcement is often more difficult to understand because we don't usually recognize its use. A negative reinforcer is something that, when removed, strengthens the chance a behavior will occur again. The seat belt buzzer is a good example of a secondary reinforcer. When you put on your seat belt, the annoying noise goes away.

Punishment is not the same thing as reinforcement. Although reinforcement (or what we usually call *reward*) seeks to increase behaviors, punishment seeks to decrease certain behaviors. Punishment is something that, when applied, decreases certain behaviors. Punishment decreases the chance a behavior will occur again. Unfortunately, punishment does not have a direct connection with the behavior we are trying to discourage. For example, if we want a student to stop hitting other children and we take away his free time, free time has nothing to do with hitting other children.

Extinction can also be used. Extinction is the removal of rewards that encourage or keep a behavior going. For example, if we laugh at the class clown when she does something for attention, this is usually rewarding or reinforcing; but if we ignore the class clown, we are using extinction. We are removing the reward (laughing) that keeps the clown going.

Skinner (1974) defined and explained this. The focus is on the control of behavior by an outside force such as the teacher. If we want students to be compliant, then we will use rewards and punishment. However, many educators believe this supports heteronomy. Children are being governed by others and there is no movement toward being governed by one's self.

### Problems with Rewards

In the book *Punished by Rewards*, Alfie Kohn (1993) suggests five reasons rewards are harmful to children. These include (a) "rewards punish" (p. 50), (b) rewards

negatively influence relationships, (c) rewards do not consider reasons, (d) rewards discourage "appropriate risk taking" (p. 62), and (e) rewards may make children less interested in what they naturally enjoy.

**"Rewards punish"** (Kohn, 1993, p. 50). How can rewards possibly punish children, especially when they are designed to do the opposite? For example, for spelling, some teachers give children a star for a perfect spelling paper. One child in the class has a learning disability, another has ADHD, and yet another is a child with mental retardation. These students are punished because of their abilities. Furthermore, rewards are like punishment in that both are used to manipulate people into doing what we want them to do.

**Rewards negatively influence relationships.** Rewards often foster competition and thus damage or destroy cooperative relationships. If only one person can win in a game, every other child is seen as someone to beat. Is this the message we want to send to children?

**Rewards do not consider reasons children do things.** If a child is constantly fighting, parents and teachers might give rewards or administer punishment to change the child's behavior. The problem with this is that rewards and punishment do not consider *why* the child is constantly fighting. When we give rewards, we are not addressing the real issue—why children do the things they do.

**"Rewards do not encourage appropriate risk taking"** (Kohn, 1993, p. 62). The key word here is *appropriate*. What, exactly, is appropriate risk taking? When a child is working for a reward, he may do only what is necessary to get the reward. He won't do any more. For instance, children in some schools are rewarded for reading certain books. However, the student might be interested in harder books or attempt to read more challenging books if rewards are not given. Some children will say, "I will only read a book from the list in which I get rewarded." The focus is on the reward and not the challenge of reading and taking risks with more difficult literature. Children are naturally interested in learning, but if we give rewards, we may be discouraging them from digging deeper for fear they might miss a reward. Rewards work, and they work fast; but in the long term, they may do more harm than good.

**Rewards may make children less interested in activities they naturally enjoy.** For those children who naturally like to draw or paint, rewards for drawing or painting are discouraging. In an informal study of children and rewards, children (who generally like to play with blocks) were shown two sets of identical blocks in their preschool classroom. The teacher told the children that if they played with one set of blocks they would receive a reward. However, they could play with the other set of blocks, but they would not receive any rewards. What happened? Children immediately flocked to play with the blocks for which they would receive rewards. However, after a couple of weeks, the teacher said,

"You can now play with either set of blocks, but you will not receive any rewards." Then what happened? The children rarely ever played with the blocks for which they had earlier received rewards. They most often went to play with the other set of blocks. When we reward students for things they naturally like to do, we are sending a message: "This is not fun. You must be rewarded for doing this" (Kohn, 1993).

The bottom line is rewards and punishment encourage heteronomy. They encourage students to be dependent on others for rewards. *Is that what we want from students?* Then giving rewards and dishing out punishment is how to get it.

## AUTONOMY

Another way of dealing with discipline is more concerned with children's thinking about their actions than simply behaving in appropriate ways. The focus is to get children to think about their actions. Sanctions are used instead of reward or punishment (Piaget, 1932). Sanctions are designed to help children think about their actions so they will act in moral ways. Piaget (1932) recommended six sanctions by reciprocity. Here we discuss four of the most practical sanctions. They include (a) temporary exclusion from the group, (b) calling the child's attention to the consequences of his actions, (c) depriving the student of whatever he has misused, and (d) perhaps the most important—restitution. Restitution means a child must make good that which he has harmed.

*Temporary exclusion* from the group is not the same thing as a time-out. If a student does something inappropriate during a class meeting, the child is sent to a time-out for five minutes. The adult says, "Go to time-out and don't come back for five minutes." Temporary exclusion from the group is different. A child is asked to leave the group until he can participate and follow the rules of the group. The child makes the decision when he is able and ready to come back and participate. Of course, this will not work with some students. For example, introverts may be pleased to leave the group and choose never to come back. However, children who really enjoy being a part of and participating in the group will be more influenced by temporary exclusion.

*Calling a student's attention to the consequences of his actions* is another sanction. A child who is breaking crayons can be told, "When you break all the crayons, we will not have any more to use." Of course, anyone who has worked with children will know that some children will defiantly say, "I don't care." In these cases, the third sanction might work.

*Depriving the student of whatever he has abused or misused* is a sanction a teacher can apply in this instance. When a child is destroying property, a natural consequence is that the child cannot use it. As with all sanctions, the consequences are directly related to the student's actions.

*Restitution* is perhaps the most important sanction we can use. Restitution means "making good that which you have harmed." Whether a student inten-

tionally commits a transgression or accidentally hurts someone or damages something, restitution can be a powerful tool to help students think about their actions and the consequences of such actions.

Here is a true story about how restitution can be effective. A sixth grader once accidentally spilled blue ink on the white blouse of the girl sitting in front of him. The teacher decided to use restitution. How can the boy make good that which he has damaged? The girl couldn't take off her blouse in class. The teacher thought about it and said to the boy, "I know you didn't mean to spill ink on her blouse, but you must make it right. I've asked the girl to bring her blouse to school tomorrow. It is your job to try to get the ink out. Your mother or father can make suggestions, but it is your job to fix it. I'll call your parents and explain the situation."

The next day the ink-stained white blouse was brought back to school. The boy took it home. His mother showed him how to use bleach and lemon juice, but she left him to make decisions about how to clean the garment. After three tries, the ink came out. The next day the boy brought the blouse back to school, after he had cleaned, dried, and pressed it. This was a powerful lesson.

Sometimes restitution is not possible. For instance, if one child pushes another one and breaks his arm, how can the child make restitution? The child is not a physician. Even so, there are ways the child can make restitution. For example, the child can be responsible for carrying books for the child with the broken arm. She can run errands for the child with the broken limb, such as getting assignments from school. Although exact restitution may not always be possible, the important thing to remember is that if we make a mistake, we must do what we can to correct it.

Having children come up with their own solutions for restitution is often helpful. This is also helpful for disputes. When children have an argument, the most likely solution is to tattle. Adults can discourage this by telling children to work to solve their own disputes and then come back and tell you what they decided and how they solved the problem.

The bottom line is that sanctions by reciprocity encourage autonomy. *Is that what we want from students?* If so, then using sanctions is how we encourage it.

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## QUESTIONS

1. What do you like about giving rewards?
2. What do you not like about giving rewards?
3. What do children learn when we give them rewards?
4. When should you give rewards?
5. For what should rewards be given?
6. What do you believe about restitution?