

Educating for Character

By David Streight

- The less we use punishment, the more effective it is

Curiously, schools that increase the amount of punishment they dole out see a corresponding rise in misbehavior. Schools that have decided to take a different tack in response to misbehavior and use less punishment have fewer disciplinary infractions.

- The most effective teachers use four positives for every negative

We cannot respond to all the good things that happen in our schools, and it is important that we respond to most of the negative events (at the same time, however, that we allow students to practice their skills in handling some issues). When students receive lots of appropriate praise from us, our criticism carries more weight when we do apply it.

- Students do not need to be punished every time they do something wrong

We, ourselves, do not seem to need punishment every time we hurt others or betray trust; why should we expect that students need otherwise?

- Punishment is most effective when it is administered immediately; when it is administered fairly; when it is accompanied by an explanation/reminder of why it is being administered

Even though we tend to believe that “they know what they did wrong,” this is not always the case. An explanation ensures clarity. With younger or less skilled children, it is also helpful to offer an example or two of how they might have more appropriately handled the situation that got them into trouble.

- Adults are more effective in addressing misbehavior when they are close to the student

Close can refer to the relationship, of course, but it also refers to physical proximity. Criticism, correction, or—if need be—disciplinary sanctions are more effective when delivered standing close to the student than from across the room.

- When adults become locked in battle with students, they usually win the short-term “battle,” but they take a step toward losing the long-term “war”

There are many ways to address misbehavior. Some leave children frustrated and angry. Others diminish misbehavior but also retain dignity and reintegrate the misbehaving student into the “society” of the classroom or the school. Our schools should have disciplinary goals in which the members of the school community agree on and work continually toward long-term objectives. Do we want only to curtail misbehavior in the easiest (for us) manner possible, or do we wish to curtail misbehavior in the manner that best ensures the student will want to be a contributing member of the school, and larger, society?

- Classroom climate comes to the extent that we meet children’s needs for autonomy, competence, belonging

This relates to the preceding point. Positive classroom and school climates result in few instances of misbehavior. Our disciplinary policies and other approaches can foster a sense of belongingness, and autonomy and competence, or they can belittle, demean, and alienate the misbehaviorer. The former is far better, for all of us.

- Teaching good behavior is more complicated than teaching numeracy or literacy
Numbers, letters, equations, and words do not change much between the ages of seven and seventeen, but the people we interact with and the societal pressures upon us do evolve during our school years. Instilling the knowledge and skills of good behavior is an ongoing process. We educators must practice the art of looking deeply into our children's needs, their actions, and their motives.

- We will always have misbehavior at school
Misbehavior offers adults valuable opportunities to teach, and children valuable opportunities to learn. Though we abhor engaging with students in disciplinary situations, the root of the word "discipline" does indeed entail teaching. If we can approach disciplinary situations with this in mind, the result may be more positive interactions in the future. The fact nevertheless remains: we will always have misbehavior at school.

- Some of the art of classroom management and discipline entails giving up our own needs and trusting in the needs, and growth, of students
Despite our feelings in certain cases, children are not small machines programmed to be selfish, mean, and troublesome. Children want to belong to a group and to interact with the group positively. If we occasionally give up our "need" to make our point, to teach a student "a lesson," or to treat all infractions in precisely the same manner, our effectiveness in later disciplinary interactions may be increased. ■