

Taking Charge in the Classroom

A practical guide to effective discipline

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**A Practical Guide
to Effective Discipline**



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To my wife Barbara for her love and acceptance and to my sons Jason and Brian for being the little, alive people they are.

Allen Mendler

For Ann; for a lifetime of support and love; and for Liza for our time of enchantment.

Rick Curwin

Preface

When we finished writing the DISCIPLINE BOOK (Reston Publishing Company, 1980), we subtitled it, A COMPLETE GUIDE TO SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT. This subtitle seemed appropriate because we thought we included everything a teacher or administrator needs to know to set up school and classroom environments where discipline problems would be prevented; to take appropriate action when a problem occurs; and to deal with those students who never follow the rules.

We called our approach Three Dimensional Discipline and provided the reader with many strategies that were designed to help teachers learn how to become more aware of themselves and their students; how to effectively and safely express feelings generated by disruptive students; how to match a strategy and technique to one's own educational philosophy; and how to use the students' participation in the development of classroom rules and consequences. We referred to these procedures as the Prevention Dimension. The Action Dimension included verbal and non-verbal behaviors that we observed as necessary to stop misbehavior when it occurred in the classroom. The Resolution Dimension defined strategies for resolving conflict with students who frequently misbehave.

It was our belief that if readers followed our guidelines in a way which was consistent with their own educational philosophy, they

would have the necessary tools for dealing with most discipline problems.

Soon after the publication of the book, we were besieged with questions about discipline which were not addressed in the COMPLETE GUIDE. We answered many discipline questions in our monthly column, "Readers Ask," in INSTRUCTOR MAGAZINE. We answered others in our inservice training programs and we answered some in a number of articles we wrote on discipline. Some of the most commonly asked questions included:

- How can I deal with stress related to discipline?
- How does the way I teach subject matter affect discipline in my class?
- How can I set up an effective program with special students who have been mainstreamed into my class?
- How can I develop effective consequences?
- What makes an Effective Consequence?
- How can I avoid power struggles? What's the best way to handle a power struggle once I find myself in one?
- What are some ways to deal with chronically disruptive students when the resolution dimension strategies are not successful and I must keep the child in my room?
- What are some variations of the social contract? How can I modify it to fit my unique situation and personality?

When we looked at all these questions we realized that it would be helpful to organize our responses into a single source so that you can be in charge and stay in charge of your classroom. TAKING CHARGE IN THE CLASSROOM is the result of that effort. We have organized information from a number of articles, experiences presented in workshops and seminars, and questions and answers from our monthly column into ten chapters: Taking Charge, Three Dimensional Discipline, Stress and Discipline, The Social Contract, Consequences, Taking Action, Creative Discipline For Out-of-Control Students, Special Problems, Discipline and the Process of Teaching, and Twenty Questions.

For administrators who are concerned with helping teachers in the classroom, we have included a section titled "For the Administrator" at the end of each chapter, which outlines specific steps that the administrator can take to improve discipline.

We have learned that it is naive to label anything related to

discipline as complete. In our workshops we are often reminded by teachers that dealing with discipline is a never ending process. If you follow all aspects of Three Dimensional Discipline, you will not eliminate the need to deal with discipline problems. As long as you are teaching a group of students with a variety of needs and personalities, discipline will be an important and constant part of your daily life in the classroom. This reality might be scary enough to frighten many teachers out of the profession. However, if you choose to view discipline as an opportunity to communicate with your students and as a challenge which will help you and your students grow, then the fear-some becomes exciting. When you take charge, your teaching becomes a dynamic, exciting, constant source for learning.

For their help in preparing this book, for generating new ideas and for sharing with us, we wish to thank the following individuals: Barry Culhane, Barbara Fuhrmann, Norm Martin, Mary Dalheim, Debbie Martorelli, Pat Demarte, Stu Horton, Jeanne McGlynn, Rocco Feravolo, Teachers of School 27 in Rochester, New York, Laurie Mandel, Bruce Johnson, Barbara Coloroso. We also thank the many teachers, administrators and special education personnel from our courses and workshops whose feedback inspired us to write this book.

Allen Mendler
Rick Curwin
Rochester, New York, 1982

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ONE

Taking Charge

*I*t is time to *take charge of your classroom*. For too long, teachers, administrators, and other school personnel have given up their control in school by either taking a laissez-faire position or by trying to turn school into a tightly controlled boot camp. Taking charge means facing up to the problems related to discipline. Effective classroom and school management occurs in a systematic, yet flexible, manner that allows and encourages both student and teacher growth through communication and understanding. It means working cooperatively to set up an atmosphere of trust, based on clear guidelines and expectations that are consistently implemented. Teachers who take charge do not need to flex their muscles by proving they are the boss. They do not need to give up control to their students. They do not have to try to make their students like them although most are well liked by their students. They are equipped with a multitude of options and strategies that help them to prevent discipline problems before they start, to actively stop misbehavior when it does occur, and to resolve problems with those students who chronically misbehave.

This book is about discipline and what to do about it. We do not and cannot offer you a cure for every problem because discipline is not a disease. You will discover in these pages many valuable strategies

and techniques that thousands of teachers have found to be effective in reducing discipline problems and the personal distress that accompanies those problems.

When you are in charge of your class, you have students who come to class on time; they are prepared for the day; they are motivated to learn; they can settle disputes through talking rather than fighting; they respect each other's belongings; and they respect you!

You will learn techniques and strategies that put you in charge by:

- preventing most discipline problems from occurring
- stopping misbehavior when it does occur
- resolving problems with students who chronically disrupt the learning process
- reducing student stress as well as your own
- using special guidelines for rules and consequences that work

Few would argue that maintaining good discipline is a necessary precondition to establishing a school or classroom climate that is conducive to learning. James Coleman, the controversial University of Chicago sociologist, recently studied the effects of private versus public school education. He concluded, after surveying 58,728 sophomores and seniors in 1016 high schools, that private schools do a better job of educating than do public schools.¹ Coleman pointed to the ability of private schools to maintain better discipline and provide more challenging academic demands. He found that public school sophomores appear twice as likely to disobey, fight, or commit acts of vandalism than do their private school counterparts.

While one may question Coleman's credibility in light of his 1966 study which found that schools make little difference in educating students, it is unlikely that contemporary educators will argue against the notion that discipline problems in schools throughout America are on the rise in scope and intensity.

Despite a plethora of classroom approaches to discipline that espouse differing and overlapping philosophies, disruptive student behavior has become a severe problem. The 1978 Safe School Study, which investigated the incidence of violence in the public schools, found that 15% of schools in large cities and 8% of all schools had serious discipline problems.² Heisner (1981), describing an extreme example, wrote about Karl, an urban elementary teacher, who said:

I teach fifth and sixth graders. And on any given day I'd guess that about a quarter of them have guns in their pockets. One kid has a virtual cannon—an old .45-caliber automatic his father or some relative brought back from World War II. And these kids are ready to use those guns, too. Man, we (teachers) are no more than a bunch of guards at a prison. Except in our case, the inmates have weapons and the guards have nothing . . . these kids are mainlining heroin; popping all sorts of pills and smoking grass. That's almost as common as air around school! And they are doing all that right in the building. And booze too. Some of those kids are already alcoholics. Rotgut wine and gin; that's what they're into. And cheap whiskey.³

Karl's comments do not describe the environment of most teachers, but the 1978 Safe School Study indicated that 27% of all junior high school teachers and 29% of senior high school teachers who were interviewed said that they hesitated to confront misbehaving students out of concern for their own safety. A recent study conducted by the Tacoma Association of Classroom Teachers showed that 13% of its teachers reported threats of physical injury by students and 40% reported themselves to be targets of verbal abuse by students.⁴ The Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency conducted an 18-month study of 757 school districts in America. They reported that between 1970–1973, the cost to the taxpayer for school vandalism was the same as the cost for textbooks (\$500,000,000 a year).⁵

Some of the other findings of the Senate Subcommittee showed that assaults on teachers increased 77%, assaults on students increased 85%, robberies were up 36.7%, rapes and attempted rapes were up 40.1%, homicides increased 18%, and weapons confiscated were up 54.4%. The National Education Association estimates that more than 110,000 teachers were physically attacked by students during the 1978–79 school year. The same survey indicated that one out of every three teachers would select another career if he or she could begin college again.

In 1978, Alfred Bloch, a psychiatrist, reported the results of interviews that he had conducted with 253 inner-city teachers in the Los Angeles area over a five-year period. These teachers had been referred for psychiatric evaluation because of varying degrees of psychological stress or the threat of assault in inner-city schools. He coined the label "battered teacher" to describe a syndrome that was equivalent to combat neurosis and common to the experiences of many teachers. Symptoms included insomnia, high blood pressure,

anxiety, depression, headaches, irritability, and sometimes psychotic collapse.⁶

Discipline problems are certainly not specific to the inner-city teacher. The New York State United Teachers, in a survey that included 5000 respondents, found that every group of teachers (urban, suburban, and rural) were reporting the same thing: discipline or "managing disruptive students" is the leading cause of teacher stress.⁷ Cichon and Kloff (1978) found the same result with Chicago teachers,⁸ and Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978) noted the same finding among teachers in Great Britain.⁹

What are the many causes of problems in schools? The causes of disruptive student behavior are many but can generally be categorized as *out-of-school* and *in-school* causes. Dillon, in discussing today's student, notes:

Teachers today are working with a different kind of student . . . parents more and more frequently admit that they cannot control their children. Many even abandon them. Many students act as free agents. They do not live at home and are responsible to no one. They have few personal restraints . . . the number of students placed on permanent suspension from school for misbehavior or maladjustment is increasing. The age of those being suspended is decreasing. Growing numbers of elementary students are out of school because they are disruptive to the teaching-learning process. The growing clarity of student rights and due process has taken away traditional discipline strategies in which many teachers found security; and many teachers are without skills to replace them.¹⁰

What causes discipline problems? What can be done about them? Much of this book addresses itself to the latter question, but it is first necessary to consider those factors responsible for the alienation experienced by too many youths in schools. The causes of discipline problems will be discussed *briefly* because it is our belief that far too much time and energy is typically wasted by schools in an effort to understand why students misbehave rather than how to change their pattern of misbehavior.

A common scenario that exists in schools which "care" is for a disruptive student to be referred to guidance, mental health, and administrative resources for an evaluation. Following the evaluation by all of the specialists, a conference is called, which informs the teacher about the student's background, home situation, test results, and other descriptive information. An hour or more is spent telling the teacher much of what he already knows, and most school people are left with a consensus about those factors responsible for the misbehavior. But converting this descriptive information to concrete and

specific action is rare. The teacher, while filled with empathy, often feels incapable of responding differently because he views these recommendations as not feasible for a regular class setting. But he does not want to appear rigid and uncaring, so he simply nods his head in agreement with the recommendations and proceeds to do the best he can.

Psychologists or social workers, well-trained in counseling, are often unavailable for needed intervention because of their limited time and excessive caseloads in most schools. Instead they meet with the child's parents, suggest the need for individual or family counseling at the local child guidance clinic, write their reports; perhaps nine times out of ten, no further action ensues. The administrator, wanting to be supportive of the teacher, makes himself available for crises, which occur with frequency, and often elicits a series of temporary promises from the student to try harder and behave better. The overall effects of this process: a lot of understanding and very little change!

Schools do not exist as isolated institutions untouched by the social events surrounding them. Schools are both a mirror image of what transpires in the communities that surround them and a force that attempts to convey and shape the values, beliefs, and attitudes of students. Being both a mirror image and a dynamic force makes it essential that we understand how factors that occur both within and outside the boundaries of schools interact to create discipline problems. Once the context is understood, teachers can learn how to act upon those factors that are within their control and learn how to live with those that are not.

Let us first examine factors that influence children outside of school.

Out-of-School Causes of Discipline Problems

Violence in Society

Without belaboring the social ills of our world, the fact is that we live in a violent society in which the resolution of problems through shootings, knifings, fist fights, extortion, and threats of injury is all too commonplace. Every day we pick up the newspaper and learn of another violent death. People's inhumanity to one another is news. Our children are constantly exposed to violence and have become