

Introduction

Caring Teachers Can Make a Difference

Children don't care how much we know until they know how much we care.

—Author Unknown

Why do we choose to become teachers? Because we care. We care about children, we care about learning, and we care about the world in which we live. We care enough to dedicate ourselves to a challenging, all-consuming, sometimes unappreciated profession.

Most of us are drawn to teaching because we want to make a difference in the lives of children. However, when reality sets in and we stand alone facing a room full of students, many of whom have personal problems, doubts about our personal effectiveness begin to enter our minds. Just being sincere in our caring about our students simply isn't enough. This book explores practical strategies for actualizing caring in the classroom so that we can indeed make a difference in the lives of our students while keeping our enthusiasm and idealism intact.

The Caring Teacher's Guide to Discipline is written for teachers and student teachers at all levels of experience and for administrators. Experienced teachers will find novel approaches for dealing with the unique needs of the current generation of schoolchildren. Beginning teachers and students preparing to become teachers will find specific discipline strategies as well as a general framework for creating a positive classroom environment. Administrators will find a uniform, practical approach to discipline that can be adapted to meet the unique needs of their school community.

Effective discipline goes hand in hand with effective teaching. Caring Teacher Discipline is composed of two essential facets: how to teach

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students the skills of appropriate behavior, discussed in Chapters 1 through 5, and how to teach students to avoid inappropriate behavior, discussed in Chapters 6 through 12.

What Is Caring Teacher Discipline?

When I taught at the University of Georgia, one of the requirements for our undergraduate education students was to ask their supervising classroom teachers about their discipline approaches so that our students would be consistent with the classroom teacher. Over the years, the vast majority of teachers responded to this request with information about how they set up rules and how they punish students who disobey them. Many have perceived discipline as a control issue: "This is what I do to control the students and get them to do what I want."

Good discipline certainly requires that our students experience the consequences of their misbehavior, but that is only one aspect of the process. The underlying premise of the Caring Teacher Discipline approach is that discipline should help children develop self-control. By focusing on self-control rather than on external control, we lift a tremendous burden from our shoulders. External control takes its toll on our psyches. It is physically and mentally exhausting to feel as though we constantly have to be on top of children, controlling their actions.

Many teachers consider discipline to be synonymous with punishment. But discipline is not the same as punishment. Punishment focuses only on misbehavior. The goal of Caring Teacher Discipline is to teach children how to do the right thing. This goal is accomplished by giving students a sense of belonging, setting limits, helping them develop confidence in their abilities, giving them responsibility, and teaching them how to solve problems and make good judgments, as well as by correcting misbehavior. Caring Teacher Discipline aims at taking some of the distastefulness out of discipline. When discipline is viewed only as punishing misbehavior, it can be quite unpleasant and discouraging. Having to punish students is draining because we must assume a negative posture and teach children not to do the *wrong* thing. With Caring Teacher Discipline, we can assume a positive posture—teaching children how to do the *right* thing.

Caring Teacher Discipline Saves Time and Reduces Stress

Our goal is to describe a viable, practical approach to discipline. A major concern of teachers is that discipline issues rob them of precious learning

time. Caring Teacher strategies reduce the amount of time needed to devote to discipline problems by effecting long-term, solid changes in behavior. Once the system is established, and as children learn how to take responsibility for their own behavior, teachers find that the time they must spend on discipline problems decreases. Yes, the approach does take time and practice initially, but the investment pays off. Teachers who have tried it have found that the recidivism rate for the same infractions is reduced dramatically. They do not have to deal with the same problem from the same child over and over again.

Another major concern with respect to discipline is the amount of stress it places on teachers and students. Caring Teacher strategies focus on collaboration—teachers, students, and parents or caretakers all working together to solve problems and help children be the best that they can be. When relationships among students, teachers, and parents are supportive, the results are energizing and stress reducing.

Caring Teacher Discipline: An Approach for All Students

Creating a caring classroom community requires intention and conscious planning. How to establish successful teacher–child relationships, child–child relationships, and teacher–caregiver relationships, which are the core of the caring classroom community, is the focus of Chapter 1.

Creating a spatial and temporal environment that is conducive to appropriate behavior is also vital. When classroom space and time are clearly organized, students develop a sense of security, which can have a calming effect on their behavior. When they know what to expect and when, it is more likely that they will do the right thing. Suggestions for setting the stage for appropriate behavior by developing a sense of security in the classroom are discussed in Chapter 2. Children must also know what is expected of them, when, and why. Clearly defined rules and limits are essential. Establishing a system of rules and guidelines is the focus of Chapter 3.

Students are also more likely to behave appropriately if they have a strong sense of self-worth. All teachers are familiar with children who feel so badly about themselves that they take it out on us and their classmates. Chapter 4 focuses on strategies for encouraging children and helping them develop positive self-images. Uses and misuses of rewards and praise, as well as techniques for boosting students' sense of competence and self-confidence, are explored.

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Many discipline problems arise because students lack social and emotional skills. Chapter 5 focuses on the communication aspect of social and emotional learning. Techniques for opening the lines of communication to solve some discipline problems, preventing others from occurring in the first place, and developing the classroom into a caring community are explored.

Anger, both ours and our students', presents a tremendous challenge. What do we do when we feel like blowing our stack because our students' behavior is infuriating? (Yes, most of us feel this way at one time or another.) What do we do with raging children who present a safety risk to us and to their peers if their fury remains unchecked? Techniques for dealing with anger are presented in Chapter 6.

Even with security, encouragement, and relationship-building skills, children will still misbehave. Such is human nature. Rather than being viewed as a failure in the discipline process, every instance of misbehavior can be viewed as an opportunity to teach self-discipline. Because figuring out why children misbehave can provide valuable insights for preventing future misbehavior, Chapter 7 discusses how to track down the causes of misbehavior. Chapter 8 focuses on what to do after children misbehave and includes a discussion of how to use problem solving as a viable tool for dealing with misbehavior. Designing appropriate consequences is explored in Chapter 9. Chronic, annoying behaviors that crop up in most classrooms at one time or another are discussed in Chapter 10. This chapter explores some of the causes of these behaviors as well as steps that teachers can take to eliminate them. Because bullying has increasingly become a problem in our schools, Chapter 11 presents insights for bullying prevention and intervention. Chapter 12 discusses how the strategies presented in the previous chapters can be successfully adapted and applied to working with major learning and behavior problems that are the result of trauma.

The Basic Assumption

Caring Teacher Discipline is based on the assumption that teachers are intelligent professionals who have been trained to use their minds. Some discipline programs try to appeal to teachers by promising that they can provide an instant system in which a teacher does not have to take time to think. All infractions can be plugged into the same formula, and no judgments, no decisions, and no discussions are necessary.

The concept of instant discipline may sound appealing at first glance but instant discipline works about as well as instant weight loss programs. They work for a while, but soon we end up at our starting point, and

sometimes even worse off, gaining back more weight than we lost. The diet programs that succeed where others fail do so because they are based on the premise that new habits must be formed slowly and reinforced. Behavior must change gradually if it is to remain changed. Anyone who claims to have an all-purpose, instant solution to classroom discipline is selling snake oil. Children just don't work that way. More important, these instant programs are an insult to our intelligence and training. We teachers must use our minds if we are to teach students how to use theirs.

Discipline is a fact of life, a normal part of the process of growing and developing and therefore a normal part of the classroom experience. All children begin life knowing none of the skills of self-control, yet they need to learn them to become independent, responsible, happy, well-adjusted members of society. No child becomes well-disciplined without having been taught what is expected and how to do it. All students misbehave at some time. Misbehavior is not by definition a sign of a teaching failure; it's a normal facet of learning and growing. Even model teachers must struggle with issues of discipline at one time or another.

The discipline strategies presented in this book encourage teachers to use their minds, yet they are not excessively time consuming. They can be easily integrated into the normal functioning of the classroom. Yes, it may take time at first to establish the system, but once students understand the process and learn to control their own behavior, discipline gets easier and easier, taking less and less time. From my own experience and that of countless other teachers, I know that, with practice, this approach takes some of the stress out of teaching and saves precious learning time. In fact, this approach can be infused into daily classroom operations in a nearly seamless fashion so that discipline does not drain away valuable learning time but rather becomes part of the learning process.

Summary of Main Points

- Discipline is a fact of life, a normal facet of the process of helping children grow and develop.
- Discipline can become part of the learning process rather than a drain on it.
- Effective discipline can reduce teacher and student stress.
- Discipline is helping our students develop self-control in a way that allows both teachers and students to feel good about themselves.
- Discipline is something we do *with* students, not *to* them.
- Caring Teacher Discipline strategies are designed to help children become good thinkers and learners as well as good classroom citizens.