

## **101 Answers for New Teachers and Their Mentors** by Annette L. Breaux, Eye on Education, Jan. 2003

The terms "discipline" and "classroom management" are often mistakenly used synonymously. Discipline is only one part of classroom management.

Mentor advice: In developing your discipline plan, notice what the most effective teachers are doing to maintain structure and order in their classrooms. The real

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key to their success does not lie in the way that they discipline their students after the rules have been broken. Rather, they have established ways of preventing most, if not all, behavior problems through the structure of their classroom management plans along with their pleasant demeanors and proactive approaches to dealing with students. The simple fact is that in a well-managed environment, there are very few discipline problems.

## **Using the "Are You All Right" Technique**

The "Are you all right?" technique is based on the simple premise that students who believe you care about them are much more apt to behave.

## **Learn to Overlook**

Teachers who expect perfect behavior from their students are being extremely unrealistic and are inviting profound disappointment. The fact is that students will talk. They will make mistakes and act inappropriately at times. Wise teachers know that if they get "nitpicky" about every little imperfection, they will literally run around putting out fires all day long, leaving little time for teaching. There is no recipe listing exactly what can and cannot be overlooked in the classroom, but a teacher's common sense, patience, understanding, consistency, positive expectations, and enthusiastic attitude should provide the knowledge and skills to know when to say "when."

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## **Handle discipline problems discreetly**

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***Public reprimand simply does not work.***

As teachers, we each have our own private "office." It is located right outside the classroom door, away from the rest of students. Though it is not always possible to deal with every discipline challenge in total privacy, teachers can always use discretion. Discretion sometimes simply involves talking at the student's desk in a quiet tone. Public reprimand simply does not work. It actually breeds resentment in students. Students will appreciate being treated with respect in such situations and will recognize that you value their privacy. Also, students are not nearly as "tough" when you deal with them one-on-one, away from the audience of the classroom.

## **Catch students behaving**

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A simple "Thanks for raising your hand" or "I really appreciate the cooperation I am observing in this group" can work wonders. Students crave our attention, and they will usually do whatever it takes to get it. Teachers who focus on good behavior more so than misbehavior have far fewer discipline problems in their classrooms. Be on the lookout for good behavior. You'll begin to notice it everywhere.

## **Provide stretch breaks**

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Students are able to maintain more of a focus if they are allowed to stand up, stretch, talk a little, and keep their blood flowing. Make it a practice to provide frequent stretch breaks. Here is one suggestion: every twenty minutes allow the students 45 seconds of stretch and talk time. Remember: when the teacher says "stop" at the end of the 45 seconds, the students should be seated and quiet.

## **Make it a point to move around the classroom a lot.**

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If all of the action is in the front of the classroom, the students in the back may choose to create their own excitement. Move around the classroom. Spend time among the students as opposed to staying in front of the class. If a student is talking or off task, calmly move closer to that student. Standing next to a student is an effective, non-threatening way of defusing a problem. Physical distance equals mental distance in the classroom, so get in there with your students.

***Move around the classroom.***

## Avoid down time

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If the students have nothing to do, they will find something to do, and it usually won't be what the teacher had in mind.

## Power Struggles

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Effective teachers do not engage in power struggles with students. They defuse the situation immediately by not providing the student with the desired response, and they maintain their composure. They do not add fuel to the fire.

## Winging It

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Don't ever think that your students will not know if you are winging it. They see it, they sense it, and they respond to the lack of structure accordingly. When a teacher devotes time, skill, and thought to planning a lesson, then teaching becomes fun rather than struggling with behavior problems, off-task students, and general chaos. In order for students to learn a new skill, the lesson must be well thought out and well taught. Good planning is a skill and it requires training, patience, practice, and guidance. Mentors can play a critical role in spending time planning with new teachers.

## Refrain from Textbook Teaching

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No textbook has an exact correlation to any district's curriculum. When selecting textbooks, districts consider those that have the closest correlation to their own curriculums. Often, however, teachers see the textbook as the definitive curriculum. They literally cover the book from beginning to end, neglecting to teach much of the district's curriculum. The effective teacher begins with the curriculum and then considers the best resources to teach that curriculum. The ineffective teacher depends on textbooks for information on what to teach, when to teach it, what questions to ask the students, what answers the students should give, and to provide formatted tests and answer keys to everything "covered."

***We teach students, not textbooks.***

A good question a teacher should ask: "If I gave the same test next week that I am giving this week, would the students pass?" If the answer is "no," then the teacher is "covering" material, not teaching it. Remember, textbooks are resources. We teach students, not textbooks.

## Make Learning Fun!

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Too often teachers think that teaching and learning should always be serious business. The fact is that we all learn best when the learning environment is interesting, exciting, and inviting. Some teachers are afraid to allow their students to have fun in their classrooms for fear of losing control of discipline. This is a mistake because "fun" and "chaos" are not synonymous. Good teachers know that in the most effective learning environments, students are actively involved in the learning; lessons and activities are both highly structured and of high interest to students, and students are enjoying the learning process.

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## Relate Lessons to Real Life

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In order for us to learn anything new, we must have something we already "know" with which to connect the new skill. When classroom work makes sense to us, we have a purpose for doing it. As you think about your own teaching methods, you will probably realize that it is difficult, at times, to come up with the "real life" connection in teaching certain skills. It is probably because it was never explained to you in that way. How can we as teachers expect our students to "buy in" to something for which they see no meaning?

## Choose Your Reactions

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As has often been said, we have very little control over our circumstances, but we have very much control over how we choose to react to those circumstances. In the classroom, students will work diligently at determining who you are as person and as a teacher. They will try to make you stop, stare up at the ceiling, and lose your patience. They will try to see if they can make you clench your teeth as you speak in an angry tone. They will even try to see how far they can make the vein stick out on the side of your neck. Don't give in. Be aware of the fact that you can always choose your reactions, in any situation.

***Don't give in.***

## **Work Cooperatively with Parents**

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***Teaching is not an exact science...***

Approach all parents with the assumption that they truly do want what's best for their children, and work cooperatively and professionally with them in helping to achieve a common goal. Listen to them when they are upset, let them blow off steam if necessary, and then establish the fact that you are anxious to work with them to solve the problem. Also, try to make sure that your comments include their child's strengths. Make it a practice to establish positive communication with parent up front, and then, when the occasional negative situation occurs, they will be much more willing to work with you in solving the problem. Parents are much more likely to support you when they believe that you are genuinely interested in their child. And even if a parent walks out of a conference disagreeing with you, make sure that he or she walks out knowing that you acted professionally and did not lose your cool. You might not be able to control all of an angry parent's reactions, but you can most certainly control your own reactions.

## **Ask a Lot of Questions**

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Teaching is not an exact science, so all teachers should remain in the state of questioning. Teachers, in general, are more than willing to share, with new teachers and veteran teachers, their techniques, their ideas, their philosophies, what works for them, and what has not worked for them. Asking questions does not make you look incompetent. Rather, it makes you look like a dedicated professional who wants to do what's best for students. True professionals will not sacrifice learning something new for fear of appearing ignorant. We are all ignorant when it comes to teaching. There's so much we don't know yet.

***There's so much we don't know yet.***