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Old-Fashioned Discipline

"The old theory, we can make 'em work; all we have to do is get tough, has never produced intellectual effort in the history of the world, and it certainly won't work in this situation."

—Glasser, cited in Gough,
The Key to Improving Schools, 1987

Behavior models of the past were based on a system of rewards and punishments intended to change negative actions to positive. Students were rewarded for good behavior and were punished for poor behavior. Reaction to discipline problems were often more knee-jerk than planned and were not necessarily based on what was best for the student. The prevailing attitude was too often, "My way or the highway." Students responded in kind, by often choosing the highway. Students who were punished frequently tended to leave school early for jobs that did not require a high school diploma, or they became a part of the problems of the street. Today, federal and state laws prevent students from dropping out of school early. We know that the model of the past that was based on

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“my way or the highway” does not work with today’s students, and that sending students to the streets leads to a significant waste of lives and resources. Glasser (1986) says, “Prior to WWII, we didn’t have specific discipline programs. We maintained order in schools by throwing out the unruly and flunking out the unmotivated. Now we keep those students in school and try to find ways to keep them quiet.”

Models of the past that were based on stimulus/response or reward and punishment techniques worked for students who were motivated to learn, but they were a dismal failure for those students whose needs were not being met or who learn differently. Curwin and Mendler (1988) define the models of the past as the “obedience models” because they were built on teachers’ gaining power over students through intimidation and punishment in order to coerce obedience. Curwin and Mendler say, “In the short term, obedience offers teachers relief, a sense of power and control, and an oasis from the constant bombardment of defiance. In the long run, however, obedience leads to student immaturity, a lack of responsibility, an inability to think clearly and critically, and a feeling of helplessness that is manifested by withdrawal, aggressiveness, or power struggles.” Burke (1992) adds, “Not getting caught supercedes everything else in the game of teacher versus student.”

Teachers today know that the obedience model not only does not work for about half of the students, it is also not brain compatible for changing negative behavior and in building emotional intelligence. The Master Teacher (2002) says that any classroom management program today should include three teacher actions.

First, any discipline program should include provisions for teaching students self-discipline processes. Master Teacher explains, “We can’t assume that our students will learn appropriate behavior simply by pointing out inappropriate behavior. Neither can we assume that criticizing, reprimanding, and punishing students for inappropriate behavior will make them change.”

Second, students must know, in advance, our expectations in terms of both academics and behaviors. Unfortunately, what is acceptable in one classroom is not necessarily acceptable in another, so we must specifically teach students the expectations. To the extent possible, these rules should be kept brief, written in the positive, and displayed in the classroom.

Third, the expected behaviors should fit the situation. For example, behavior that is acceptable when students are reading silently is not the same as behavior expected when students are working in small groups. By the same token, behavior in the classroom is not the same as behavior in the lunchroom or in the gym. The more that teachers and administrators can come to consensus on behavior expectations for the school, the smoother the transition from one situation to the other will be. In the classroom make sure that students understand the expectations for different learning situations. For example, a class rule such as “no talking” does not make sense in light of a brain compatible classroom where students are encouraged to interact at various points in the learning.

In the chapters to follow, we will look at a model for building emotional- and self-awareness in students so that students are responsible for their behavior and for their learning as well. We will examine the characteristics of good classroom management and how to build self-management in students. A process for helping to prevent off-task behavior while keeping yourself under control, as well as guidelines for solving more difficult discipline problems will be included. In Chapter 6, a step-by-step guide for setting good discipline management standards is provided to get you started on a plan for your classroom.