Discipline: Effective School Practices

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Traditionally, with respect to school discipline, American educators have had two distinct aims: (a) to help create and maintain a safe, orderly, and positive learning environment, which often requires the use of discipline to correct misbehavior; and (b) to teach or develop self-discipline. Both aims are equally important and should always be included in the development and evaluation of school discipline practices. Whereas the first is generally viewed as an immediate aim (to stop misbehavior and bring about compliance), the second is viewed as long term (to develop autonomy and responsible citizenship). Both aims are reciprocally related in that each promotes the other. Both also serve a preventive function. That is, by correcting misbehavior and developing self-discipline, schools help prevent the future occurrence of behavior problems.

CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Too often, schools fail to understand that maintaining safety, including the correction of misbehavior, is a prerequisite for developing self-discipline, but it is not sufficient. Schools and other institutions that are effective in establishing and maintaining order and safety are not necessarily effective in developing self-discipline or in preventing future behavior problems. This is most evident when adult supervision, systematic rewards, clear rules and expectations, and consequences for misbehavior are the primary techniques used to manage behavior. When those external techniques are later removed, individuals are expected to function independently after having learned little other than "don't get caught." Prisons provide an excellent example of reliance on external control, as do many schools that adopt a similar zero-tolerance mindset.

Zero Tolerance: Punishment Focus

The zero-tolerance approach to noncompliance and misbehavior exclusively focuses school discipline on punishment—suspension, expulsion, alternative education, "sentencing manuals" (i.e., extensive codes of conduct for minor to major behavioral infractions), and the constant policing of student behavior. Although certainly more positive, programs that simply replace such punitive techniques with the systematic school-wide use of tangible rewards for good behavior, regardless of grade level or individual needs and without emphasizing other strategies that promote self-discipline, fail to teach students the skills that will promote appropriate and independently guided behavior.

Comprehensive School-Wide Plan

Certainly, fair and reasonable policies governing serious and chronic behavior problems, as well as the strategic use of rewards, should be part of a school-wide discipline program. However, effective schools make this only one part of a much more comprehensive plan. A comprehensive school-wide plan consists of a full range of evidence-based strategies and techniques to achieve four important goals: (a) developing self-discipline, (b) preventing misbehavior, (c) correcting misbehavior, and (d) remediating and responding to serious and chronic behavior problems. Strategies for each of these components of comprehensive school-wide discipline follow.

DEVELOPING SELF-DISCIPLINE

Self-discipline is seen in socially and morally responsible behavior that is motivated primarily by intrinsic factors, not solely by the anticipation of external rewards or fear of punishment. Research shows that self-discipline promotes positive relations with others and a positive school climate, fosters academic achievement, and promotes self-worth and emotional well-being. Strategies for developing self-discipline

are commonly part of evidence-based programs for character education and for social and emotional learning. Such programs include the following strategies:

- *Implement curriculum activities that teach social, emotional, and behavioral competencies.* Multiple evidence-based packaged programs exist for teaching social, emotional, and behavioral competencies (see Recommended Resources below for a list of websites that review such programs). In addition to or as an alternative to adopting a packaged program, schools should consider infusing lessons and activities for developing self-discipline throughout the existing curriculum, such as in social studies, literacy, and health education.
- *Provide multiple models of social and moral problem-solving and responsible behavior.* Multiple models of targeted behaviors, social cognitions, and emotions should be included in the school's curriculum (e.g., literature, videos) and, more important, in the real life of the classroom and school.
- *Provide multiple opportunities for students to apply skills of social and moral problem-solving and responsible behavior.* Such opportunities would include class meetings in which classroom and school-wide problems are addressed; meaningful student government activities (e.g., helping others in the community); programs and activities for conflict resolution, peer mediation, service learning, and cooperative learning; and sports and extracurricular activities.
- *Challenge self-centered thinking.* This recommendation applies to each of the learning contexts above but especially to the context of disciplinary encounters. Nearly all children tend to excuse or justify moral transgressions with various rationalizations (e.g., ''He started it,'' ''I didn't mean to hurt him,'' ''Others did it, too''). Such excuses and self-centered thinking should be tactfully confronted, and models of desired thinking, feeling, and acting should be highlighted.

PREVENTING DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

In general, research supports the effectiveness of an authoritative approach to discipline (as opposed to an authoritarian or permissive approach) in the prevention of behavior problems. Authoritative teachers set high standards and hold high expectations; enforce rules and standards in a firm, fair, and consistent manner; and promote autonomy by encouraging students' active participation in decisions regarding their behavior. Although authoritative teachers use punitive and reactive strategies when needed, they focus more on the use of positive, proactive techniques for increasing the

likelihood that students will exhibit appropriate behavior willingly rather than grudgingly.

The quality of the teacher–student relationship is of primary concern. Warmth, acceptance, and support are delivered noncontingently and thus are not conditional upon a student's behavior. Effective teachers strive to develop a positive relationship with every student in their classrooms, and seek to promote positive relationships and a sense of community among the students themselves. In sum, authoritative teachers create a classroom climate, and school-wide climate, in which students follow norms for appropriate behavior out of respect for the teacher and one another.

Additional prevention strategies commonly used by authoritative teachers include the following:

- Develop social problem-solving and decision-making skills among students.
- Establish and maintain close communication with each student's parents or caregivers, and work hard to garner the parent's support.
- Provide academic instruction and activities that motivate learning.
- Create a physical environment that is conducive to teaching and learning.
- Establish predictable procedures and routines.
- Frequently monitor student behavior and respond immediately to signs of misbehavior.
- Use praise and rewards strategically to maximize effectiveness in improving behavior while minimizing the risk of diminishing intrinsic motivation. One key to doing this is by using praise and rewards in an informational rather than controlling manner (see Bear, 2005 for specific techniques).

CORRECTING MISBEHAVIOR

Research supports an authoritative style of discipline not only in the prevention of behavior problems but also in their correction.

Authoritative Approaches to Correcting Misbehavior

Authoritative educators guide rather than control students. They view disciplinary encounters not merely as situations that may require punishment as a means of correction, but as opportunities to teach appropriate behavior and help develop self-discipline and prevent future behavior problems. Similar to their approach to prevention, authoritative educators combine responsiveness (e.g., demonstrating support and caring; striving to prevent lasting harm to the teacher–student relationship) with demandingness (e.g., remaining firm, communicating clear expectations of appropriative behavior, imposing fair consequences). When correct-

ing misbehavior, effective educators tend to use one of two general types of behavioral techniques: punitive and replacement.

Punitive techniques. These various forms of punishment range from unpleasant verbal reprimands, ''the evil eye,'' proximity control (i.e., standing near the student), and taking away privileges (e.g., recess) to much harsher forms such as suspension, expulsion, removal to an alternative education program, and corporal punishment (i.e., spanking, which is allowed in approximately half of the states, although most professional organizations oppose it).

Replacement techniques. These strategies are intended to achieve the same goals as punitive methods, but focus on teaching or strengthening desired behaviors that might replace the undesired behavior. Common replacement techniques include direct instruction, positive reinforcement, modeling, social problem-solving, conflict resolution, and anger management training.

Punishment: Limitations and Alternatives

Educators who are most effective in correcting misbehavior use both punitive and replacement techniques.

Limitations of punishment. Effective educators clearly recognize the limitations of punishment: (a) It teaches students what not to do and fails to teach desired or replacement behavior; (b) its effects often are short term; (c) it teaches students to aggress toward or punish others; (d) it fails to address the multiple factors that typically contribute to a student's behavior; (e) it is likely to produce undesirable side effects (e.g., anger, retaliation, dislike toward the teacher or school, social withdrawal); (f) it creates a negative classroom and school climate; and (g) it can be reinforcing (i.e., negative reinforcement), such as in time-out and suspension, by allowing students to avoid or escape from situations they find aversive (e.g., academic work, peer rejection, a harsh and uncaring teacher).

Alternatives to punishment. Due to these limitations, when correcting misbehavior, effective educators work hard to avoid using punishment. Instead, they focus on strategies for developing self-discipline and for preventing misbehavior. When correcting misbehavior, they are much more likely to use mild forms of punishment, such as physical proximity, taking away privileges, verbal reprimands, and ''the evil eye'' than harsh forms of punishment such as suspension. When punishment is used, it is used fairly, judiciously, in the context of a caring and supportive relationship, and

typically in combination with replacement techniques that teach or strengthen desired behaviors. The latter would include techniques that emphasize social and emotional competencies and positive teacher–student relations, such as joint social problem-solving and induction, where the focus is on the impact of one's behavior on others.

REMEDIATING AND RESPONDING TO CHRONIC AND SERIOUS BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

For the majority of students in most schools (i.e., the universal tier), the above strategies and techniques are generally sufficient for developing self-discipline and for preventing and correcting behavior problems. Students with chronic or serious behavior problems, and especially those shown to be resistant to interventions, require more comprehensive and intensive services, resources, and supports.

Similar but More Intensive Strategies

The strategies and techniques used for chronic and serious behavior problems differ more in intensity than design, relative to the strategies described above for more everyday discipline issues. That is, many of the same techniques are used, but delivered in a more frequent and systematic fashion (e.g., requiring a classroom aide or smaller class size).

More Targeted and Intensive Strategies

Other strategies, however, are more specific to this group of intervention-resistant students, and more congruent with an intensive (Tier 3) level of supports and interventions. Such services and supports should be:

- Comprehensive, targeting multiple risk and protective factors
- Broad-based, adopting a system in which a network of mental health specialists, educators, and others in the community work together with students and their families
- Evidence-based
- Intensive, sustained over time, and implemented with fidelity
- Individualized
- Cognizant of the importance of early intervention, including interventions provided at an early age as well as those provided when indicators of behavior problems first appear

These interventions, services, and supports address not only the needs of students with chronic behavior problems, but also those who may have no history of behavior problems but nevertheless exhibit a serious behavior problem requiring immediate intervention, supports, and

services. This would entail crisis prevention, intervention, and response, especially for acts of violence.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES
General

Bear, G. G. (2008). Classroom discipline. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 1403–1420). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Bear, G. G. (2010). *From school discipline to self-discipline.* New York: Guilford Press.

Bear, G. G. (with A. Cavalier & M. Manning). (2005). *Developing self-discipline and preventing and correcting misbehavior.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon

Intervention Central: http://interventioncentral.org

Developing Self-Discipline and Preventing Misbehavior

Character Education Partnership: http://www.character.org

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: http://www.casel.org

Correcting Misbehavior

Intervention Central, *Punishment techniques and student behavior plans*: http://www.interventioncentral.org/htmdocs/interventions/behavior/punishguidelines.php

Serious and Chronic Behavior Problems

Consortium to Prevent School Violence: http://www.preventschoolviolence.org

Walker, H. M., Ramsey, E., & Gresham, F. M. (2004). *Antisocial behavior in school: Evidence-based practice.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

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