

Introduction

W H O S E R U L E S ?

B Y M A R Y B E T H F O R T O N

I *don't care*

about your stupid rules!

A comment heard in the principal's office of an elementary school

Rules suck!

Graffiti found in bathroom stalls of
elementary and middle schools

Rules are for fools!

A student comment heard in the hallway of a middle school

“Rules are bad,” announced my four-year-old son recently with an indignant “Humph!” when I told him I was working on a book on rules in school. “You want to do something and the teacher just comes along and says you can’t!”

This is clearly a four-year-old point of view—*I want what I want and I want it now and anything that gets in my way is bad*. But it’s a point of view shared by many students in elementary and middle schools today, where rules are often seen as adversarial, as decrees handed down from the authorities above to keep you from doing what you want.

The teacher is the sole creator and enforcer of these rules, announcing them on the first day of school with little or no discussion of their meaning. This message is clear: Follow these rules or else.

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While this approach to rule setting can be effective in establishing a sense of order in a classroom (which we very much need), it does little to help children develop *self-discipline*, ethical thinking, or an understanding of how to be contributing members of a democratic community. At its worst, it invites tension, blind obedience, or a constant battle of wills between adults and children in school.

This book offers a different approach to rules in school. It's an approach to classroom and school-wide discipline that has helped teachers in a wide range of K–8 settings establish calm and safe classrooms and schools while helping children develop self-discipline and a sense of responsibility. It reflects the beliefs that discipline is a subject that can be “taught,” just as we teach reading and writing and math, and that children learn best when they're actively engaged and invested in constructing their own understandings.

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This is not a new approach to discipline. It's been used during the past twenty years by many teachers using the *Responsive Classroom*® approach to teaching (see the page titled “About the *Responsive Classroom*® Approach” at the end of this book). It draws on the thinking of many great educators, theorists, and child psychologists, most notably Rudolf Dreikurs, Alfred Adler, Haim Ginott, Jane Nelsen, William Glasser, and Ruth Sidney Charney.

The primary goals of this approach to discipline are to:

- Establish a calm, orderly, and safe environment for learning.
- Foster an appreciation for the role of rules in school.
- Help children develop self-control and self-discipline.
- Teach children to be responsible, contributing members of a democratic community.
- Promote respectful, kind, and healthy teacher-student and student-student interactions.

Rather than being “handed down from above,” rules in these classrooms and schools are created collaboratively with students and teachers during the early weeks of school. Not only are students more motivated to follow rules that they've helped to create, but in the process of creating the rules students learn much about the role of rules in a democratic society.

While there will always be times when students don't like following the rules or choose not to follow them, students in these schools generally view rules in a positive light. They understand that the rules are there to keep them safe and help them achieve their goals in school.

As one third grader so clearly put it, “Rules in school are good because they help keep kids safe and in control so they can learn. But I’m glad at my school there isn’t too many rules. Just a few good ones.”

In the chapters that follow you’ll learn a step-by-step process for creating “a few good rules” with your students and for teaching them to live by these rules day in and day out, both in the classroom and on a school-wide basis. You’ll learn practical strategies for modeling and practicing the rules as well as tools and techniques for how to respond when the rules are broken.

The first three chapters provide an overview of the tools and techniques, grades K–8. The following three chapters show these tools and techniques being used at specific grade levels: K–2, 3–5, 6–8. Each of these chapters is written by a teacher at that grade level: Deborah Porter for grades K–2, and Kathryn Brady for grades 3–5 and grades 6–8. The last chapter, written by Chip Wood, offers strategies for working with students, colleagues, administrators, and families to increase consistency around discipline practices outside the classroom.

Below is an overview of the two most common approaches to rules and discipline being used in classrooms and schools today and how they differ from the approach described in this book.

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Two Common Approaches to Rules and Discipline

1. An autocratic approach: “Because I said so!”

Some of us are familiar with an autocratic approach to rules from our own years in elementary and junior high school, where the list of rules looked something like this:

- No running in the hall.
- No hitting.
- No pushing.
- No cutting in line.
- Stay in your seat.
- Raise your hand to talk.
- No talking back.
- Keep your feet flat on the floor.
- No gum chewing.
- Don’t interrupt.
- No writing on the desks.
- No talking.

Often stated in the negative with a high premium on being quiet and still, the rules were there to keep us in line. They appeared magically on the first day of school and few dared to question them. It wasn't important that we understand the rules. It was just important that we follow them.

If you didn't follow the rules, you knew something bad would happen. The teacher would yell, or you might sit in a corner for ten minutes, or miss recess to write "I will not write on my desk" 100 times, or make the dreaded trip to the principal's office.

Implicit was the notion that without the rules, our natural impulses would take hold and at any moment chaos would erupt: Just imagine thirty children racing around the classroom, screaming at the top of their lungs, gum dropping from their mouths, pushing and fighting with one another.

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One of the key assumptions behind this approach to discipline is that children are not intrinsically motivated to cooperate or treat others with care and respect. They are by nature unruly and impulsive—largely incapable of self-discipline—and it's the teacher's responsibility to make them behave. Left to their own devices, they'll most likely do the wrong thing.

Many children opt to comply in an autocratic system, but largely out of a fear of what will happen to them if they don't. Others become masterful at putting on a good show for the teacher while completely disregarding the rules when no one's looking. Still others become extremely resistant and defiant or, in the other extreme, so completely dependent on adults to guide their behavior that they find it impossible to make ethical decisions on their own.

The end result may be an orderly classroom, but at what cost? An approach to discipline that's based on fear and punishment keeps children "under control" but it does little to teach them self-control. It achieves compliance but it also yields anxiety, resentment, and anger. While the classroom might appear calm and productive on the outside, students often feel humiliated, afraid, and resentful on the inside, hardly optimal conditions for learning.

2. A permissive approach: "Can you please cooperate now, please?"

On the other end of the spectrum is a permissive approach to rules and discipline where there are no clear limits for behavior. Here rules are negotiable and easily bendable. They may be clearly stated and posted in a prominent place in the room, but everyone knows they won't be enforced consistently.

Teachers consistently ignore misbehaviors or respond to them with repeated gentle reminders and second chances. Students quickly learn that a polite "I didn't

really mean to do it” or “Please give me another chance” will almost always release them from responsibility.

Teachers using this approach may believe that the most important thing is for children to like them. They may put a high premium on being “nice” and may worry about stifling or alienating their students by being “too hard” on them. Or they might believe that the best way to influence children’s behavior is to ignore undesirable actions while reinforcing desirable ones with generous doses of praise. Or perhaps they’ve experienced the negative effects of an autocratic approach and don’t want to inflict it on others.

Whatever the underlying intention, a permissive approach leads to many problems. Among them, small disturbances routinely escalate into bigger ones, conflicts are unresolved, and rudeness, teasing, and taunting go unchecked, leaving many children feeling physically and psychologically unsafe. If somehow students are “behaving” in such a classroom, they’re often doing so to please the teacher and win her/his approval, not because they’re intrinsically motivated to do so.

Students in these classrooms can feel just as fearful, tense, and dependent as those in classrooms using an autocratic approach, says Deborah Porter, longtime primary grade teacher. “Instead of being confined by an overly controlling teacher, these students are crippled by the lack of clear boundaries and structure,” she says. “We might think that having no limits and no adult guidance makes children feel free, but it actually makes them feel tense and out of control. They’re always trying to figure out what’s acceptable and what isn’t.”

Teachers hold so little authority in these classrooms that when they do need to gain control of the classroom, they often resort to pleading, cajoling, or bribing to try to convince students to cooperate. Many grow so thoroughly discouraged by students’ behavior and the lack of cooperation that they decide to quit teaching altogether.

A flip-flop approach to rules: “I said ‘No.’ Well, maybe one more chance. Now, that’s it. I mean ‘No.’”

There are teachers, many of them in their early years of teaching and without any training in classroom management, who bounce back and forth between the autocratic and permissive extremes. This is perhaps the worst kind of discipline, with the complete lack of predictability and consistency leading to confusion, frustration, and anxiety for students and teachers alike.

I'll never forget my own early years in a classroom, teaching language arts six periods a day to twenty-five to thirty eighth graders. The summer before starting, I spent many hours preparing exciting lessons on literature, creative writing, and journalism. I reflected on my own years in junior high school and reminded myself of all the things I didn't want to be as a teacher. I would not lecture, yell, dominate, or humiliate. I would not put the desks in rows or insist on quiet and solitary work. I would not fill the days with mundane busywork and worksheets.

I didn't spend much time thinking about rules or how I would approach discipline. I figured that by now the students would know what was expected of them. Besides, they'd be so excited by what they were learning there wouldn't be much need to talk about anything as routine and mundane as rules. Not to mention the fact that if there were a need for rules, I didn't have the slightest idea how to address it.

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I envisioned a vibrant classroom, full of lively debates, plays, poetry readings, and engaging conversations about literature. Students would be self-motivated and industrious. The room would be orderly and calm yet buzzing with the excitement of learning. Students and teachers would treat each other with kindness and respect.

These were great intentions but I didn't have a chance of pulling them off. With little supervision and no roadmaps for creating the social climate I wanted, I bounced back and forth between being too permissive to being too strict, from being too nice to being too mean, from pleading to punishing. I knew full well that what I was doing was ineffective, but I didn't have the strategies or guidance I needed to change it.

The lack of clarity made the classroom tense. Students became increasingly impulsive and testy, always searching for limits that didn't exist or that changed daily. The lively conversations and debates I envisioned became free-for-alls with students interrupting and talking over one another, putting each other down, and laughing at each other's mistakes.

With so few tools to draw on, I watched in horror as I saw myself becoming the teacher I never wanted to be—yelling, lecturing, humiliating, pushing desks back into neat rows, and preparing mounds of busywork just to keep things under control. While I knew there must be a better way, I had so little experience or guidance in how to create a calm, safe, and orderly climate without resorting to punishment or humiliation that I felt demoralized and ready to give up.

Teachers facing greater challenges today

My story is hardly unique. A recent survey of 118 school districts across the country found that the biggest barriers to new teachers' success are poor classroom management skills (eighty-two percent) and disruptive students (fifty-seven percent). (Gordon 1999, 2) Sadly, new teachers are the most ill-prepared to handle the challenge of discipline. Many teacher education programs provide little by way of training in discipline strategies, and too often new teachers receive insufficient collegial support or mentoring about classroom management during their early years in the classroom. Lacking the skills and experience needed to manage twenty-five children in a small space for seven hours a day, many new teachers become discouraged and quit.

But it's not only new teachers who feel this discouragement. Increasingly, experienced teachers are feeling overwhelmed by the growing demands placed on them as more and more students come to school with poorly developed social skills, a lack of impulse control, and little capacity to handle their anger and frustration.

In a recent interview on National Public Radio, retired principal Joanne Busalacchi emphasized that students are increasingly coming to school without the social skills they once had and without the skills they need to learn well. As a result, she said, "Teachers today have a very, very difficult role, much more so than when I began teaching thirty-seven years ago." (Busalacchi 2001)

Discipline in our nation's classrooms and schools is clearly one of the most pressing issues facing educators today. In teachers' workrooms, at PTO meetings, and in national polls, educators and parents consistently identify discipline as one of the most important and challenging jobs teachers have.

In a recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll on attitudes toward public schools, discipline was named as the country's top educational concern, as it has been in all but one of the last fourteen surveys by this group. (Gordon 1999, 1) Another national survey found that forty-three percent of public school students felt the behavior of other students interfered with their school performance. (Gordon 1999, 1)

How teachers approach discipline—how they establish rules in their classrooms and schools and live by those rules, day in and day out—can make all the difference between whether children feel safe or threatened in our schools, motivated or discouraged, successful or defeated. It can determine whether a classroom will be orderly or chaotic and whether children will learn or flounder. Ultimately it impacts whether teachers feel fulfilled or frustrated, whether they like their work, and whether they stay in the teaching profession.

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Discipline in the *Responsive Classroom* Approach

The approach to rules and discipline described in this book is neither autocratic nor permissive. Often referred to as an efficacious, positive, or judicious approach, it aims to help children develop self-control, begin to understand what socially responsible behavior is, and come to value such behavior. It does not rely on punishment or rewards to “get students to behave.” Neither does it ignore behavior that is detrimental to the child or to the group. Rather, this approach offers clear expectations for behavior and actively teaches children how to live up to those expectations. Teachers using this approach help children become aware of how their actions can bring positive and negative consequences to themselves and others. When children break rules, the teachers help children recognize and fix the problems their actions may have caused.

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Teachers using this approach strive to be firm, kind, and consistent in their approach to rules and rule breaking. Their aim is to create calm, safe, and orderly classrooms—one where teachers can teach and children can learn—while preserving the dignity of each child.

This requires a constant balancing of the needs of the group with the needs of the individual, the need for order with the need for movement and activity, the need for teachers to be in control of the classroom with the need for students to be in control of their own lives and learning. It requires taking the time to teach children how to be contributing members of a caring learning community.

Just as teachers don't expect children to come to school knowing how to read or write, teachers using this approach don't make assumptions about the social skills children bring to school. Some children will come to school with highly developed social skills and many years of experience being part of a large group. Others will need to start from the beginning.

School provides an ideal setting for social learning. There are endless opportunities at school for children to learn to control their impulses and to think about the needs and feelings of others. Whether they're learning to wait their turn to talk, ask politely for a marker, welcome a newcomer into a group, or disagree with someone's ideas without attacking them personally, school is rich with opportunities for children to learn to think and act in socially responsible ways.

The time teachers spend on classroom rules is an investment that will be richly repaid. As long-time teacher Ruth Sidney Charney writes in *Teaching Children to Care*, “I've grown to appreciate the task of helping children take better care of themselves, of each other, and of their classrooms. It's not a waste. It's probably the most enduring thing I teach.” (Charney 2002, 18)

Three Approaches to Discipline: A Summary		
<p style="text-align: center;">Autocratic</p> <p>Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The teacher alone controls classroom life. ▪ Behavior standards are high but often not developmentally appropriate. ▪ Rules are created by the teacher. Children are not allowed to question them. ▪ The teacher uses punishment and external rewards to get children to obey. <p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students follow rules only when the teacher is watching. ▪ Students learn submission and little about self-control and assertion. ▪ Students' relationships with the teacher and with each other are undermined. ▪ Students may feel anger, fear, humiliation, and a desire for revenge. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Permissive</p> <p>Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The teacher has little control of classroom life. ▪ Behavior standards are low. ▪ The teacher uses praise, rewards, cajoling, and empty threats to try to convince students to cooperate. ▪ The teacher ignores a lot of undesired behavior. <p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The classroom is chaotic. Students constantly test limits and show disrespect. ▪ Students learn self-centeredness and manipulation skills. ▪ Students' relationships with the teacher and with each other are undermined. ▪ Students may feel insecure because of the lack of predictability. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Responsive Classroom Approach</i></p> <p>Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The teacher helps children develop self-control. ▪ Behavior standards are high and are developmentally appropriate. ▪ Students help create rules. The teacher helps them practice the rules. ▪ The teacher uses logical consequences to help students learn from mistakes. <p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The classroom is calm and civil. Students show a high degree of responsibility, kindness, and respect. ▪ Students learn to think and act in socially responsible ways. ▪ Students' relationships with the teacher and with each other are strengthened. ▪ Students feel safe in school.

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Inside the Teacher's Head:

The Importance of Underlying Beliefs

What goes on inside the teacher's head as s/he uses the approach to discipline described in this book is perhaps what distinguishes it most from other approaches. In order to use this approach successfully, teachers must believe in children's intrinsic desire to "do the right thing." They must remember children's need to be engaged in their learning and to feel a sense of belonging and significance.

Instead of believing that children need to be controlled by adults through the use of external motivators such as punishments or rewards, teachers must see themselves as helping children learn to be in control of themselves. That means that when children ignore, forget, or intentionally break the rules, the teacher sees these moments as opportunities for learning and responds in this spirit.

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For example, picture this fairly typical scene in a fourth grade classroom: It's the beginning of math, and the children have formed small work groups. When the teacher gives a reminder that it's time to settle down, most of the groups begin to focus on their work. One group of four students, however, continues to chat about unrelated topics and makes paper airplanes using their math papers and pencils.

Faced with this situation, a teacher using an autocratic approach to discipline might think, "They can never follow the rules. I should've never let them work together. I knew they couldn't handle this. That's the last time they get to work together!"

A teacher using a permissive approach might think, "Why can't they ever follow directions? Maybe they didn't hear me, or maybe they forgot. I don't want to upset them. Maybe if I ask them nicely."

A teacher using the *Responsive Classroom* approach might think, "The rules were clear and these students aren't following them. Their work isn't getting done. They need to see that sitting together only works if the assignment is getting done."

It's this last way of thinking that is most likely to lead the teacher to effective ways of handling the situation—ways that preserve the dignity of the children and lead children to consider the effects of their actions. It's the way that allows children eventually to become self-disciplined.

Works Cited

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