

Ruth Sidney Charney

TEACHING CHILDREN TO CARE

Classroom Management for Ethical
and Academic Growth, K–8

Preface by Nel Noddings

REVISED EDITION

All net proceeds from the sale of *Teaching Children to Care* support the work of Northeast Foundation for Children, a non-profit educational organization whose mission is to foster safe, challenging, and joyful classrooms and schools, K–8.

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To my best teachers:

My parents, Hattie and George

My husband, Jay

My children, Daniel, Emma, Apple, Hannah, and Lisa

My grandchildren, Natasha and Karina

And my dear friend Jane Lazarre

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Preface

TEACHING HAS ALWAYS BEEN a demanding job, but today it is especially difficult. Unparalleled interest on the part of government and the public is evident and, in some ways, welcome. But the focus of that interest is far too narrow. Wise parents and teachers want more from our educational efforts than higher test scores.

Ruth Charney gives teachers help on things that really matter. She wants children to learn how to care for themselves, their fellow students, their environment, and their work. Her book is loaded with practical wisdom.

To give readers a sense of how important Charney's themes are, I'll say a bit about just two of them. Charney reminds us that our words make a difference, and she urges us to separate the deed from the doer: "I like you. I don't like this behavior." Not only should teachers convey this message when a child misbehaves, but children should also learn to cast their complaints against others in this positive way. In everything that is said, we should try to confirm the best in each child and to preserve relations of care and trust.

Positive language is important in guiding academic progress as well as acceptable classroom behavior. I was reminded of my own early years as a high school math teacher. Intending to be helpful, I would often say "It's easy! Just watch," and then I'd show how easy it was for me. But it wasn't easy for many of my students, and my having pronounced it easy made them feel stupid. Later I learned that it is better to say "This may be hard, but you'll get it. I'll help." When a child responds with "That wasn't so hard!" both the teacher and student feel great.

Charney's approach to homework is wise and courageous. She lets children know that "getting homework" is a sign that a teacher thinks they are ready to do independent work, and she offers techniques for getting them ready. She also asks educators to think critically on issues involving homework: Is homework really

helpful for all elementary children? Are there some who would do better without it? Are there other ways to help children learn how “to plan, organize, and think through” their work? Homework should serve significant educational purposes and, if children are unable or unwilling to do homework at a given stage, we must find other ways to pursue those purposes. Homework is not an end in itself.

Using Charney’s positive approach to classroom management, the whole school day will probably go better. The time spent on learning to care is not wasted; it is not time taken away from academic instruction. Kids who are friendly, happy, and cooperative tackle their academic work with more confidence, and both teachers and students enjoy greater success. They are not adversaries but partners in caring and learning. Charney deserves our thanks for showing how it can be done.

—NEL NODDINGS

Professor Emeritus

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Foreword

I WROTE THE FIRST EDITION of *Teaching Children to Care* in 1991, when I had been teaching for twenty years. The book was one teacher's attempt to extract and organize lessons out of experience—my own teaching experiences as well as the many classroom stories I heard from other educators.

Respected education professor Nel Noddings has said that schools should be “places in which teachers and children live together, talk to each other, reason together, take delight in each other's company.” A philosopher, mother, and former math teacher, she continues, “Like good parents, teachers should be concerned first and foremost with the kind of people their charges are becoming.” My intention in writing *Teaching Children to Care* was to share what I had learned about how to help students become the kind of people we want them to be.

The revision of *Teaching Children to Care*, ten years later, has been a project of addition. The book's essential points remain the same, but its scope has broadened—a necessary result of my venturing into new teaching territory since the first writing. The text remains largely anecdotal and personal in voice, but it is enriched with new juicy stories as well as additional insights and exciting innovations gathered from recent work with teachers in diverse communities.

In the last ten years, I have honed and challenged my skills as a teacher of seventh and eighth graders. This book, therefore, now integrates more examples related to middle school classrooms. There are descriptions of activities suitable for this age group around building community, generating rules at the start of the year, cooperative learning, and “road-tested” problem-solving techniques.

There are also ideas for promoting the habit of meaningful conversation between teachers and middle-school-age students. This is especially important at a time when tragic incidents of school violence have led us to ask hard questions.



We ask what schools are doing wrong, as well as what could have gone so terribly wrong within the individual students who committed the violence. There are no simple answers, but my work with middle schools convinces me that student-teacher conversation is a bedrock element that must be structured and scheduled into the day-to-day business of school. When we talk with our students, we allow them to feel known, and they must feel known to feel valued and have a sense of belonging. Meaningful conversations are not a guarantee against violence, but cultivating meaningful conversations is one thing that schools can do better.

The new material in this edition of *Teaching Children to Care* also reflects a widespread trend, noted by psychologist Daniel Goleman, that children come to school less able to pay attention and less able to motivate themselves. Children today are “more lonely and depressed, more angry and unruly, more nervous and prone to worry, more impulsive and aggressive,” Goleman writes. Recently I observed a first grader pop in and out of circle time, sometimes withdrawing to his own drumbeat, sometimes leaving on command for some act of aggression. Far from a simple distraction, his behavior required constant monitoring. Despite adult interventions, however skillfully and calmly executed, one child like this (and some classes have more than one) can drain the teacher and upset the fragile harmony of the classroom. Teachers are all too familiar with such situations, and so one chapter of this book now focuses on new approaches and strategies to help our “five percent,” as these most difficult and burdened children are sometimes called.

Finally, this new edition is informed by the ongoing work of Northeast Foundation for Children in promoting the use of the *Responsive Classroom*[®] approach in K–8 classrooms. The original edition was written just as the six components of this

approach to teaching and learning were finding clear articulation. Outreach was just beginning. In the years since, thousands of classroom teachers and hundreds of schools and school districts in Maine, Texas, California, Florida, Ohio, Minnesota, and other states have used the approach. In the process of taking our message and methods to others, we have grown. While holding on to the central intent of managing classrooms in a way that allows children to gain self-control and invest in their learning, the Foundation continues to observe and reinvent, to modify and expand, to make sure our approach is adaptable to different environments and, at the same time, has universal efficacy. (See the end of the book to learn more about the *Responsive Classroom* approach.)

The past ten years have not all been about change, however. Those years have also reinforced for me what is most basic and striking about teaching: the fact that teachers, working alone or in concert, are able to construct and shape learning communities. I have seen teachers transform dull or even hostile environments to make space for laughter and tears, for eager successes and successful failures, for bold hope and hopeful daring. And the fact that our capacity to nurture students' social and intellectual growth is connected to how we manage our classrooms—I learned that over and over again.

Recently, I attended a conference devoted to the topic of safe schools. The audience, made up of elementary through high school teachers and administrators, was asked the following question: “If you could give children one idea—just one—knowing they would carry that idea with them throughout their lives, what would it be?” Animated conversations followed as we avidly chatted with a nearby partner. Our answers, reported back to the assembly, included the notions of respect, kindness, civility, dignity, the Golden Rule. “Where is algebra?” the keynote speaker asked. Algebra does matter, of course, but it is apt to matter for more children when we reinforce the belief that how they interact with one another matters every bit as much. The need to integrate our social and academic visions for our students is just as urgent as it ever was.

Another thing that has not changed is the nature of doubt and uncertainty in teaching. In 1991, I wrote that teaching is by definition uncertainty. Ten years later, and after thirty years in classrooms, it is still a truthful claim. As I prepared a demonstration lesson for a group of seventh graders, I felt my stomach coil into knots. My seasoned wrinkles and gray hair, trophies (or scars) of longevity, were no insurance against the unpredictable, our children. There is no insurance. There is only the measured poise, the rehearsed face to maintain should a disaster occur, and the faith that what may break may also be fixed.

A colleague, one of the new passionate young teachers with whom I work, recently told me, “Teaching is the most exhausting thing I’ve ever done. I’m exhausted all the time. I’ve never been so exhausted.” I looked at him at first in disbelief, taking in his youth, his athletically fit frame and Outward Bound leadership adventures, and then, with a nod, acknowledged our common ground. We all leave our classrooms with the tapes running, wondering who or what we forgot. Our shoulder bags are heavy with the past and future—papers to correct, plans to make for the next day, supplies to scrounge. Our heads are stuffed with children, crammed full of problems to resolve and next steps to identify. Our bodies are pumped with the success of the day or pressed down with the failure of a single moment.

The teacher’s day doesn’t end at three o’clock. I know teachers and principals who drive children to the eye doctor to make sure those glasses are repaired; teachers who keep special stashes of peanut butter and crackers for the students without breakfast or lunch; principals who keep stocks of warm jackets and extra boots, or go door-to-door to raise the extra dollars needed to fund critical programs. I know so many teachers who provide the special outings to museums or camps to extend horizons in more than one way. A friend recalled the need to periodically bunk children in her own house when their parents went on overnight drinking binges.

And even with the most loving care and the best teachers, children fail. They mess up; they defy parents or teacher and go their own, sometimes self-destructive, way. Despite our tireless efforts and sometimes exceptional talents, we have only partial control over the results that are our children. Teaching is, by definition, uncertainty.

I attempt with this book to reconcile these uncertainties through the ordering of experiences, an ordering which, by necessity, places the integrity of theory against the immediacy of the classroom. The theories concern what is known about how children learn and how they develop.

I hope with this ordering also to reveal an approach that allows educators to gain confidence in their own agency, to find purpose and sustained strength in spite of uncertainty. I hope to offer a way of teaching and learning that frees teachers, despite sure obstacles, to pass on an affection for moral and ethical behavior in order to create schools in which “teachers and students live together, talk to each other, reason together, take delight in each other’s company.”

—RUTH SIDNEY CHARNEY