

Introduction

“Good morning”

The children drift into school in the morning and make their way into the classroom. The teacher stands by the entrance and welcomes them. A message is on the chart next to her.

“Good morning, Leah... Hi, Andy... Morning, William... Morning, Renee. I like your new scarf.”

Leah mumbles a response. Andy nods and scurries off. William waves, sort of. Renee continues, head down, into the room. The teacher, feeling like a piece of furniture, realizes that she is now getting cranky.

At Morning Meeting time, she informs the group, gathered in a wide circle, that she looks forward to seeing them and that she likes to show this with a “Good morning.” What is she to think, she asks in a somewhat joking way, when she says “hello” and someone says back, “mmf” or “grrr,” or pulls back—she imitates a turtle receding into a shell. Giggles. The children enjoy the pantomime. How nice it feels, she tells them in a more serious vein, to hear a hearty round of “Hello” or “Good morning” or “Nice day.” Perhaps we just need some warm-ups, she suggests.

“Good morning, Eddie.” Eddie smiles and looks around. “What might Eddie say now?” the teacher asks.

“Good morning, Ms. Charney?” a student ventures.

“Yes. I’d like that. Eddie?”

“Good morning,” Eddie manages in a quiet voice.

“Good morning, Justin.”

Justin replies with spirit, “Good morning, Ms. Charney.”

“I like that nice strong voice, Justin. I also like hearing my name.”

Then Justin is asked to greet someone else in the circle, until there is a full round of “Good mornings” and every single person in the class has been named. Every student has been greeted and has named and greeted another. In this “game,” each child is spoken to, is named in a friendly manner, and is responsible for continuing in that manner. The mood of the circle is now awake and even gay. “Yes,” the communication implies, “we are glad to be here. Yes, we are glad to see each other.”

The “Good Morning Game” initiates each Morning Meeting until there is a spontaneous flow. Weeks later, the teacher bends over the very quiet Eva. “Good morning, Eva.”

Eva, with a shy, crooked grin, looks up, and with her face almost touching her teacher’s face, says, “Good morning.” In a sudden gleeful gesture, the two rub noses and then go off to work. ❖

The water table

The group at the water table has been instructed that water stays in the water table. Water may go in buckets, in funnels, in vials, but not on each other. That is the rule.

The class has practiced good ways to keep the water in the table. They have demonstrated ways to pour. They have also practiced using a mop. They have been eager to try out this new area in the room for a “choice” activity.

Ricky is quick to garner vials, buckets, and hose-like extensions for his work. He deftly hooks up a pump to a hose and, with proper pressure, releases a stream of water through the hose into a bucket. Ricky casts a furtive eye about the room. Next there is a high-rising spout, then a minor geyser, and finally a predictable eruption cascading out of the bounds of the table, drenching the floor and his neighbor’s feet.

“Ricky, you wet me!” cries the offended child.

“I didn’t mean to. It was an accident,” he retorts, with an equally indignant stare, looking for the whereabouts of the teacher. I observe that Ricky, with his furtive glance, is not merely exploring the force of his instruments, the thrill of seeing water travel a distance. He is also testing the limits of his force and the distance between him and the teacher.

“Ricky. I noticed that you were doing some interesting experiments.

I also noticed that you weren't using the rules. You need to leave the water table now. Perhaps tomorrow you will choose to remember to use our rules." ❖

Sherill

The fifth grade class is writing. Sherill has been looking about, putting occasional marks on her paper, erasing, crossing out, staring out the window. For a while she appears to study her friend, who is busy writing and writing. "Did you see Jesse's haircut?" she whispers, trying to start a conversation.

Rachel looks up from her writing and nods, but she quickly loses interest in Sherill's comments and returns to her own story. Sherill gets up and flounces across the room in the direction of a pencil sharpener, weaving in and out of the tables, her arms swinging recklessly. The inevitable happens: A folder goes flying off a desktop, its pages scattering across the floor.

"Can't you watch out!" cries Beth, as she gets up to collect her sheets of writing.

"I'll get you!" Sherill hurls back and stomps over to her seat.

"Sherill," the teacher says softly. "You seem to be having a hard morning. Perhaps you'd like to tell me about it...or maybe even write about it. Sometimes when I'm in a lousy mood or having a bad day, it helps me to write a letter to a friend, even if I don't send it. And some people like to write in their journal or make up a scene for a story. What do you think would work for you now?"

Sherill shrugs. "I don't have a friend to write to."

"You could write to me."

"Maybe."

"See what happens. I'll check back in a few minutes."

Sherill laboriously smoothes a fresh piece of paper, selects pencils, and, head close to the page, begins to write. Gradually, the tension in her face and her fingers relaxes. She writes continuously until the period is over, then carefully folds her paper and slips it into her desk. As she gets up to go to her next group, she calls over to Beth, "Wanna have lunch?" ❖



THIS BOOK IS ABOUT MANAGING A CLASSROOM so that it is nurturing, respectful, and full of learning. It is about teaching children to care. It draws on my many years as a teacher in inner-city schools and, more recently, in an independent school that was founded in order to apply a developmental point of view. The most important thing I have learned is that discipline is a subject to be taught, just as reading or arithmetic is taught. It is taught, year after year, without apology. It is taught with the conviction and affirmation of the teacher.

I started out knowing so little. I was ill prepared to succeed in the classroom, but I learned. What I have learned will always need to be refined and revised, but it has given me focus and courage. I hope that readers will gather strength and renewed vigor from this book so they can face the endless lists of challenges: unruly Jerome, "Make me" Annie, Sean of the Spitball Hall of Fame...the fights before and after school, the lunchroom frenzies, the boots that Lee denies he put in the toilet...the pencil that belongs to Chris that Jenny insists she found in her desk...the notes, the secrets, the cliques...the ragged transitions, the minimal effort on assignments, the no-effort excuses...the tattling, the teasing, the sneaking...Teachers face enormous pressures. It is a struggle just to survive as a proud teacher of today's children in schools that may lack even the basics. It is a challenge to help children grow up to be decent and kind, and to retain faith in ourselves, our children, and our expectations. To meet these challenges, we need to know how to manage a classroom and how to teach our children to behave.

We need to know how to pass on an affection for moral and ethical behavior in a difficult world.

Thirty-five years ago, I was applying for my license as a New York City public school teacher. There was an oral exam. I recall my innocence uneasily and the scene vividly. I entered a dimly lit classroom. In the rear of the room sat three crouching figures. In my mind, they were all in black cloaks! One of the figures was making a rasping sound as she filed her nails. The filing stopped only as the question was read in an absurdly slow and nasal voice:

“Imagine that you are teaching a lesson. From the back of the room, one of the students tosses a paper airplane. You ask him to stop. He does it again. What will you do?”

I answered the question with all the cockiness and confidence of one who had never taught. It was actually so simple. In my mind, there were two choices.

The first choice would be to take the “Tough Authority” approach and invoke a chain of command that would end in a punishment for the misbehaving student:

“Either you stop or I will take away your paper and book.”

The student is on a roll. Quietly, he extracts page 37 from his geometry book and folds it neatly into a 747 design, which swoops and crashes only moments after I have made my decree.

“That’s IT! Jane, go get the principal.”

The principal calls the boy’s mother. The mother calls the father, and then the boy gets in trouble, which assures his future cooperative behavior in my class.

The second choice, I thought, would be to assume that the student was simply not interested in the geography lesson that was underway. If properly motivated, no child would misbehave. Thus the answer would be to refocus the lesson. I would pick up the airplane and begin a brilliant lesson on aerodynamics:

“What is it that makes planes fly?”

“I dunno.”

I hold up the paper model. “What is it that makes this plane fly?”

“I threw it.”

I am not to be put off with such wit. I take out a flat sheet and ask, “If I threw this paper, would it fly?”

“Nah.”

Soon the recalcitrant student and others in the class are enthralled and productively exploring the mysteries of flight. They are comparing model planes. They are observing and calculating the flight patterns of

different wing designs. Robby is making a graph. Christine is measuring distances to the quarter inch. Our previously disruptive student leaves on a mission to the library to look for books on airplanes.

I used the second approach for my answer. When I finished, the examiners thanked me. I left feeling confident and righteous. The rasping had stopped, and I had passed the exam. I went on, with license in hand, to teach my first class. (Later, I discovered that I was not being graded on the content of my response. I was not graded on my educational expertise. My examiners were attending not to teaching skills, but to my syntax. Because I spoke in English sentences, I passed.)

I also later realized that my answer was a daydream, a fine fantasy. It wouldn't happen like that. It could happen that such a wonderful exercise would infuse the classroom, but not without what I had yet to learn: classroom management.

I went into my first classroom knowing about curriculum, interesting new ways to teach math and reading, and how to get terrific materials. I had spent a lively summer in a workshop, building, planning, and collecting. I set up my first grade room in centers with tri-wall dividers I had constructed myself. I had an easel in the art corner. I had a salt-water aquarium in the science center. I had over twenty new books in the library and all different shapes and colors of pasta in the math center. On the first day of school, I surveyed an inviting and rich learning environment. I was proud of it all.

I will never forget what Grady and Jerome and Michelle did to that room in the first week. The paint from the easel went straight onto Jerome, who then went straight to the principal's office. Pockets were heavy with pastas, which were eaten raw, thrown, and stepped on, but not sorted or classified. The salt-water aquarium soon resembled the Meadowlands Swamp, a repository for just about everything. Books were torn in an effort to speed-read, and rather than the eager and busy sighs of intent learners, there were whines and whimpers:

“Teacher, LOOK.”

“Teacher, he broke my pencil.”

“Teacher, what do we do now? Is it time to go home?”

It was a disaster. I felt personally wronged. I blamed the children. I blamed the school. I blamed everyone and anyone. I cried and was ready to quit. I knew that I had to quit or I had to learn to run a classroom. In that crisis, I decided to learn. I cleaned up the mess. I junked the dividers. I observed other teachers—experienced teachers who still smiled. I began again. From that awful beginning came the greatest insight of my teaching life: A teacher can teach children to behave.

With time, patience, and determination, I could get Jerome's paint on the easel. After two years, Grady stopped puncturing materials and people. The books were

being read. The pastas were sorted. The children made choices. It became a learning room. I understood that children didn't need to come to school knowing positive behavior. But they had to have a chance to learn it deliberately, slowly, and with encouragement. I realized that I can teach it—that we can teach it. I can look at my next smart aleck or menace and think confidently, "I'll get you. You'll learn!"

In my living room, there is a painting. It shows a world of red and green and yellow. Circling the world are children holding hands. Carefully etched in and out of the circle is a bright blue sky and a radiant sun. It was painted in June by Jerome, my most careless painter the previous fall. It was a present to his teacher.

In this book, I share techniques that I used with Jerome and others. I describe approaches and tools I use to set up rules, expectations, and significant consequences. These ideas are based on my own experiences and the insights and work of many, many teachers. The book is strongly influenced by my work for the past twenty years with Greenfield Center School, a unique collaboration of teachers working toward a functional, caring community for both children and adults.

These teaching approaches also represent what I have learned from the work of educational and developmental theorists. Their writings are liberally quoted throughout the text, and their ideas are etched into, and between, the lines of the book. (Their works are included in the list of recommended resources at the end of this book.) I did not invent this material, but I patiently collected and collated what I understood from observations and readings until it felt like my own. I hope teachers will treat this book the same way. It is meant to be a living and livable guide. If some of these approaches don't work for you, I hope you will find yet another way.

The aim of every chapter and every technique is the creation of self-control and community, which I define as the capacity to care for oneself, for others, and for the world. A single, basic goal is to teach children in such a way that they gain affection for ethical behavior.

"I'll try myself"

"Jessica called me a bad name."

"Did you talk to Jessica?"

"Yes. I tried to, but she wouldn't listen."

"What do you want to say to Jessica?"

"Not to call me names."

"Show me. How will you tell Jessica that you don't like names?"

“Jessica, I don’t like when you say I’m stupid.”

“I wonder if you did something to make Jessica mad? What do you think?”

“Well... ’cause I didn’t want her to take the markers ’cause she keeps them too long.”

“Oh. So maybe you should have shared the markers. Do you want to try to talk to Jessica again by yourself, or do you need my help?”

“I’ll try myself.” ❖

IN THIS SECTION, I introduce and describe the basics of building a learning community in the early weeks of the year. This work serves as a foundation and reference point throughout the year and sets the tone and expectations necessary for a productive, exciting, and safe classroom community:

- ❖ Chapter 1 defines the goals of self-control and community.
- ❖ Chapter 2 describes the techniques of the first six weeks and their extension through the rest of the year.
- ❖ Chapter 3 offers some ways to create workable classroom rules with children.
- ❖ Chapter 4 explains the importance of teaching the rules so that they are understood and practiced in the real life of the classroom.
- ❖ Chapter 5 describes the creation of a “Critical Contract,” a technique for involving parents, students, and teachers in setting a student’s individual goals for the year.