

Overview of the *Responsive Classroom*[®] Approach to Discipline

“Rules are bad,” announced my four-year-old son 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 schools, 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 announces the rules on the first day of school with little or no discussion of their meaning. The message is clear: Follow these rules or else. 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 classroom discipline. It's an approach that has helped teachers in a wide range of elementary school settings establish calm and safe classrooms 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.

This is not a new approach to discipline. It's been used since 1981 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).

The primary goals of this approach are to:

- Establish a calm, orderly, and safe environment for learning
- 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

In classrooms using this approach to discipline, rules are connected to students' and teachers' goals for social and academic learning. Often, the rules are created collaboratively with students and teachers during the early weeks of school. 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 practical strategies for establishing clear behavior expectations and teaching students how to achieve these expectations. You will also learn tools and techniques for how to respond when children misbehave.

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, and 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 6–8.

Three Common Approaches to Discipline

Following is an overview of three approaches to discipline often used in classrooms and schools and how they differ from the approach described in this book.

An autocratic approach: “Because I said so!”

Some of us are familiar with an autocratic approach to discipline from our own years in school, where we encountered a long list of rules, often stated in the negative and with a high premium on being quiet and still. These rules were meant 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 students understood the rules. It was just important to follow them.

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.

This approach to discipline is still at work in classrooms today. One of the key assumptions behind this approach is that children are by nature

unruly and impulsive—largely incapable of self-regulation—and it’s the teacher’s responsibility to make them behave. Left to their own devices, children will most likely do the wrong thing.

Many children opt to comply in an autocratic system, but largely out of 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.

This approach can achieve an orderly classroom, but at what cost? An approach to discipline that’s based on fear and punishment externally controls children but 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.

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 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 only to please the teacher and win the teacher's approval.

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. One risk is that these teachers will grow so thoroughly discouraged by students' behavior and the lack of cooperation that they decide to quit teaching altogether.

A flip-flop approach: "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 support around 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 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.

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 permissive and being strict, being nice and being mean, pleading and 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.

My story is hardly unique. Although new teachers may have learned about classroom management in teacher education coursework, actually managing twenty-five or more students in a small space for seven hours a day can be challenging, especially if teachers lack mentoring or administrative support.

But it's not only new teachers who face this challenge. Experienced teachers, too, can feel overwhelmed by the demands placed on them as more and more students come to school with poorly developed social skills, a lack of impulse control, and few tools to handle their anger and frustration.



Discipline in our nation's classrooms and schools is clearly a pressing concern and an important factor in students' success. How teachers approach discipline 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.

Discipline in the *Responsive Classroom* Approach

The approach to 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.

This approach to discipline 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 misbehave, teachers use respectful strategies to stop the misbehavior and restore positive behavior as quickly as possible so that children can continue to learn and the teacher can continue to teach.

Teachers strive to be firm, kind, and consistent. Their aim is to create calm, safe, and orderly classrooms 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 discipline 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, p. 18)

W O R K C I T E D

Charney, Ruth Sidney. (2002). *Teaching Children to Care: Classroom Management for Ethical and Academic Growth, K-8*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc.