

Fostering Self-Discipline

Self-discipline, a primary goal of education, helps students exhibit good behavior in and out of school.

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Kevin was well behaved when Mrs. Johnson kept a close eye on him. But it seemed like the second she turned her back or stepped out of the room, he would bother other students, call out, and disrupt classroom activities. She asked herself, “Why won’t Kevin control his behavior, even after detentions, suspensions, and visits to the principal’s office?”

From its inception, a primary goal of public education has been to develop self-discipline among students, best seen as them exhibiting socially and morally responsible behavior. This goal coincides with another important educational imperative, as well as an alternative meaning of the term *discipline*: to correct misbehavior to create and maintain a safe and orderly environment that is conducive to learning.

Although both goals are interrelated and equally important, in recent years, the first goal (developing self-discipline) has largely been overshadowed by educators’ focus on the second (managing and correcting misbehavior)—particularly in middle level and high schools. Rather than creating more effective schools, this imbalance actually undermines school safety; the ability of teachers to teach; and efforts to instill in students the self-directed discipline they need to become productive, responsible citizens.

Self-discipline refers to assuming social and moral responsibility for one’s own actions, and doing so under one’s own volition (i.e., not solely out of fear of punishment or to gain external rewards). The term is often used interchangeably with *autonomy*, *self-regulation*, and *self-control* and is viewed as a necessary component of character education and social and emotional learning. By fostering self-discipline, educators develop students who understand

and appreciate the difference between right and wrong, assume responsibility for their actions, recognize the importance of cooperative relationships, and show genuine care and interest in others.

Over the years, various strategies for developing self-discipline have gained and lost popularity. Educators have embraced discipline approaches under myriad names—including *behavior modification*, *assertive discipline*, *character education*, *conflict resolution*, and *zero tolerance*—with mixed results (Bear, 2005). Although peer-reviewed research on the efficacy of many of these programs is nonexistent, there are strategies that are supported by theory and research in psychology and education that educators should use to foster self-discipline. They are found in several evidence-based character education and social and emotional learning programs. Although most programs are designed for elementary and middle level schools, many strategies can be used at the high school level as well.

Fostering Self-Discipline

School administrators can take an active role in setting the tone for how behavior problems are handled within the school. They should emphasize that the school’s primary goal is to foster self-discipline. Although correcting misbehavior is often necessary and appropriate, the goal of developing self-discipline should always be kept in the forefront, as seen in the following strategies and techniques, which can be used either alone or in combination with corrective techniques (Bear, 2005, 2008).

Show unconditional care, respect, and support. Adolescents are much more likely to respect, listen to, and act like the adults whom they care about and respect. When students think that teachers don’t care, they are much

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Student Services is produced in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Articles and related handouts can be downloaded from www.nasponline.org/resources/principals.

more likely to misbehave. By demonstrating warmth and respect, educators act as models and provide the support that students need to learn from their mistakes. Moreover, students often feel proud of themselves when they live up to the standards of caring adults. In contrast, when they fail to please or live up to those standards, they feel guilty about their own behavior. Pride and guilt are important motivators of behavior.

Involve adolescents in decision making.

Research shows that high schools that have fewer behavior problems have students who think that the school rules are clear, fair, and not overly harsh (Arum, 2003). Students are more likely to think that rules are fair when they participate in their development and agree to them. Although agreement is not always possible—and shouldn't always be expected—attempts to obtain agreement will improve students' adherence to reasonable rules.

Involve families. It is important to work under the assumption that families generally want what is best for their children and want to work cooperatively with the school (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Involving and educating parents is a great way to form stronger home-school partnerships and to give parents tools to incorporate similar discipline strategies within the home. Research shows that the majority of adolescents believe that parental involvement is needed in their schools (Connors & Epstein, 1994).

Model qualities you want students to possess as adolescents and adults. Learning to solve problems and behave appropriately is reinforced when adults model effective thinking skills and related emotions (e.g., empathy, pride, and regulation of anger). Educators should reflect on the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors they do not desire in students

Tips for Parents

- Consistently show love, care, and respect. Be a caring adult with whom your child can discuss concerns or problems.
- Give positive attention to the things that your adolescent is doing right, rather than just focusing on misbehavior. Recognize and praise good decisions.
- Establish clear expectations and consequences for breaking the rules. Be firm and consistent when disciplining your child.
- Emphasize how misbehavior negatively affects others and the importance of acting responsibly.
- Avoid harsh punishment. Physical punishment develops little self-discipline and simply teaches your child that it's OK to act aggressively and to try to avoid getting caught. Consider more thoughtful, effective forms of punishment, such as taking away privileges or services.
- Your child might challenge your rules; listen to his or her concerns. Adolescents often have legitimate issues regarding the age appropriateness of rules that were effective when they were younger. Try to find fair and responsible middle ground and involve your child in rule-making when possible.
- Remember that effective parenting practices must change as children grow up. Gradually transition from constant supervision and external control to allowing more autonomy and independence for adolescents.
- Communicate with your child's teachers. Teachers usually set up similar behavior expectations in their classrooms to those found in students' homes. Communicating early and often will help teachers and parents set consistent rules.
- Remember that all children and adolescents make mistakes at some point. Making mistakes is part of growing up and one important way to learn how to make good choices and act responsibly.

What Next?

The following are important questions and steps for principals to consider with their staff members when developing policies and programs to promote self-discipline in their students.

- Think about the discipline philosophy in your school. Is “discipline” used to simply reduce negative behaviors or is the goal of developing self-discipline also a priority? If the school’s focus is primarily on the use of rewards and punishment to manage student behavior, how might those strategies actually undermine the development of self-discipline?
- Think about the current policies of your school. What programs and measures have been put in place to address the social and emotional needs of students who might be demonstrating behavioral difficulties?
- What steps can schools take to encourage parents and guardians to foster student self-discipline in their children?
- Do students feel valued and cared for in your school? If you asked students randomly in the halls whether their teachers cared about them, what would they say?

(e.g., blaming others and readily displaying anger toward others) and how they might be modeling these inadvertently.

Use rewards and praise strategically.

The systematic use of tangible rewards to manage student behavior is a topic of considerable controversy, particularly in high schools and when such rewards are perceived by students as controlling (Bear, 2005, 2008). Except for individual students who have chronic behavior problems and lack intrinsic motivation, tangible rewards should be used rarely. Sincere praise or a surprise reward (e.g., no homework for the weekend after a week of hard work) are often more effective than a reward that students perceive as controlling (e.g., “If you want a no-homework pass, you have to obey the class rules”).

Infuse instruction and discussion of social and emotional competencies throughout the curriculum. Social studies and language arts are two curriculum areas that

are ripe for discussing social and moral issues and for developing social and moral problem solving. In these two areas, the lessons themselves can also be excellent models of character traits and social and emotional competencies. Socratic dialogue, group discussion, self-reflection, and role playing are much more effective than lecturing or directly teaching the “right” behavior, especially among adolescents.

Recognize individual differences.

Students differ in their natural capacity for self-discipline. Parental discipline plays a significant role in how students behave and respond to expectations. Students have different temperaments and personalities, and some require more supervision, guidance, and patience than others. School discipline that recognizes and responds to these differences can greatly enhance the self-discipline of all students.

Emphasize responsibility for one’s own actions. Whenever possible, allow students to “fix” their mistakes, including damage to property or others’ hurt feelings. Give students opportunities to practice responsibility, such as performing classroom tasks or running errands, and ensure that the students fulfill their obligations. Highlight the importance of responsibility and self-discipline for future outcomes, such as attending and completing college or gaining desired employment.

Remember that they are adolescents.

Many techniques that are used in early childhood are not appropriate or effective for adolescents. As children reach adolescence, monitoring behavior should be a shared process, and both the educator and the adolescent should have an active role. Instead of policing behavior, educators should assume the role of listener and adviser, with a focus on fostering self-discipline. Greater responsibility and autonomy should come with increasing age.

Correcting Misbehavior

When students exhibit frustrating and emotionally charged misbehavior, it becomes easy for administrators and teachers to get lost in the moment and use discipline measures that are not effective or do not teach the student

Recommended Web Sites

American Academic of Pediatrics
www.aap.org/parents.html

Character Education Partnership
www.character.org

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

Consortium to Prevent School Violence
www.preventschoolviolence.org

Mental Health America
www.nmha.org

Pro Teacher Directory
www.proteacher.com

School Improvement Research Series
www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/5/cu9.html

alternative ways to behave. The following tips can help educators correct misbehavior effectively.

Be calm, firm, and fair. Monitor your own mood and try not to demonstrate excessive anger. Your anger will interfere with your ability to convey to adolescents why the behavior is inappropriate. It also can reinforce the message that anger—as well as aggression if your anger is accompanied by corporal punishment—is an appropriate response to a stressful situation. Always focus on why the behavior is wrong, not on how the student is “bad.”

View the situation as a teaching opportunity. Understand that students often learn from their mistakes. Focus on what they should have done differently and how they should react in a similar situation in the future. Simply punishing students without providing rationale for why it was wrong will not teach them what is expected from them.

Focus on the impact of the misbehavior on others. Imposing consequences for misbehavior is important. A primary focus should be on explaining the reason behind consequences, with particular emphasis on the perspectives of others involved. For example, ask, “How do you think your classmate feels when you say mean things to her?” or “What might your classmates or parents think?”

Consider factors that contribute to the behavior and challenge any “errors” in the student’s thinking. Typically, adolescents know how to behave but choose not to. Their reasons for misbehaving can vary. When correcting misbehavior, focus not only on the student’s behavior but also on factors that contributed to the behavior (such as classroom environment and peer influences). This includes confronting various excuses, such as blaming others and especially the mind-set that it’s okay to misbehave if you think that you’re not

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going to be caught or punished. Such thinking should be questioned and thinking that focuses on issues of fairness, justice, responsibility, and the needs and rights of others should be encouraged.

Use punishment, ranging from verbal reprimand to suspension, in combination with the previous techniques. Punishment and discipline are not the same thing, and educators need to be able to distinguish between them. Most punishment that is carried out in isolation has serious limitations and results in generally poor outcomes. But when used in combination with building discipline skills, appropriate punishment can help promote safety and foster self-discipline.

Conclusion

Developing self-discipline in students takes time; patience; and the efforts of many people, including parents, educators, and students themselves. The efforts are well worth it. Adolescents who develop self-discipline show

desirable qualities in and out of schools: they understand right and wrong, act in a morally responsible manner, are empathetic and concerned about the well-being of others, and assume responsibility for their actions. **PL**

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