

## **Making Middle School Discipline Work**

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Philosophy makes our actions as teachers discipline, a process which helps students improve their behavior, rather than punishment, which only uses negative reinforcement to stop students from engaging in behavior we don't want.

I strive for discipline, because I know that punishment doesn't work, especially for that target population I teach that seems to be punished all the time. I also work from a discipline approach because appropriate school behavior is the behavior of the workplace, and I want my students to develop behavioral habits that will help them be successful in high school and the world of work beyond. I once read a kind of Dear Abbey letter to a kindergarten teacher asking him how important it is that kindergarteners be able to read before they enter school. His answer resounded with me. He said that the research shows that students are generally at the same place in their ability to read by the third grade, whether they came into kindergarten reading or not. The most important thing, he said, was for kids to come into kindergarten with the social and attention skills they will need to be successful in school: the ability to pay attention to an adult, follow rules, ask questions, sit for an extended period of time, play well with other kids, and ignore distractions.<sup>1</sup> My two-year-old nephew, Ben, is in a private Montessori preschool. His teacher requires a two-hour naptime every day – she puts on some sleepy music and has each of her 17 charges lay down and be silent for two hours, even if they don't sleep. And they do it. In my mind, it is this teacher's structured naptime that will serve my nephew best as he moves through school, not the letter shapes she teaches him or the Montessori science curriculum, because he will have the basic behavior structure needed to learn anything. As my sister told me about this miracle-working preschool teacher, however, I also wondered about all the other kids who don't have the benefit of that structure, whose only "silent" time may be in front of the television, where their brains are bombarded with images and sound to the point where they cannot think and grow to require constant outside stimulation. Those are the kids that get bigger and come to my classroom.

What I know about kids that get in trouble at school is that they don't and often can't ignore distractions, and as we know a classful of kids is rife with distractions – Keonté walking around the room for tissue or to sharpen his pencil, touching every desk or student that he passes. Reco in the back, silent, but mouthing to his friends and laughing at their responses. Lydia and Kanitra, involved in a she said/she said drama that could easily devolve into a fight, especially as the other girls silently preoccupy themselves with choosing sides. If I could have each of the kids in my troubled reading class individually, one-on-one, I could guarantee their learning. In a class of twenty, especially during the most outside-oriented social years of an adolescent's life, the only guarantee is that I will have to fight for my students' attention every day. And if I can get their attention, I know they can learn. Getting the kids to "be good" is only the start, because they often fake learning very well. Silence does not equal engagement in the task at hand.

It does not surprise me that my lowest level reading class has the greatest number of discipline problems. I've heard it as a chicken or egg question. Do their behavioral problems cause their lack of success in school, or does their lack of success cause the behavioral problems? In my

mind, it doesn't matter – all I know is that I have to get past the behavior before I can begin the process of discovering why my troubled readers have not been successful and what I need to do about it. For a few, stopping the behavior in themselves and their peers does give them the opportunity to learn. For most, there are other issues. The danger is chalking it all up to behavior, and that's easy to do, given that the behaviors are often so crazy, socially abnormal, or relentless that it's all a teacher can attend to. Focusing on the behavior is dangerous because then we never actually see and address the learning that is or is not going on, or the learning habits that are or are not there.

Most of the time, I don't believe that kids choose to act in unproductive ways. As adults, we think it's a choice, but it's important to qualify the word *choice*. Kids have to have been taught how to choose well, and had enough opportunities to have chosen well that they develop the habit of doing so. Brain research tells us that adolescents have very low impulse control,<sup>2</sup> and I suspect it takes a great deal of successful practice for the kids I teach to make good choices. Give me a kid like my own nephew, who will grow up in a structured environment and who will have developed the habits of mind needed for school, who will have limited television time, who will be carefully taught how to play with other kids in controlled situations, who will have access to and modeled practice with time management, copious reading material, and social interaction. If, when he is an eighth grader, Ben chooses not to do his Social Studies project or act like a fool in class, he will have made a choice, a bad one, but a choice nonetheless. Because my students never developed the ability to make a good choice, I don't think they actually make choices. They respond. They react. They don't choose. Ask any sixth grader who just threw a rock at another kid why she did it. She won't know. At best, it will be because the kid did something to her and it's a revenge move. Teachers' flabbergasted question, "Why did you do that?," is always going to be rhetorical, whether we like it or not. While I do not assume that my kids can make good choices, I always assume that they should be taught to do so. I do everything I can to insist that they make good choices, so when faced with a similar situation in high school later on, they have a better chance of making the good choice on their own. I require good behavior, I pester parents, I mandate help sessions, I disallow zeros, whatever it takes without lowering my standards for their learning.

So, what is the silver discipline bullet? How do we get every kid every day to be focused and ready to learn?

Unfortunately, we don't. It's just not possible, given the diversity of our kids' backgrounds, middle school impulsivity, the fact that they are constantly growing and changing, and the myriad day-to-day dramas that unfold at home and at school for each of our students. But that does not mean we throw up our hands and let chaos reign. Certainly not. We simply have to look at classroom discipline as a process, a process through which students develop the ability to focus on learning in school and make good choices. After ten good years in the middle school classroom, there are a number of points I have for putting in place a working discipline process.

### **1 – Be a Calm Assertive Pack Leader**

I am really bad about changing everything I see into a metaphor for the classroom, but the work of Cesar Milan, popularly known as the Dog Whisperer, is particularly applicable. [The Dog](#)

Whisperer is a dog training show currently on the National Geographic channel, but Milan maintains that he actually trains humans. According to his website,

“...we need to become our canine's calm, assertive pack leader. A dog that doesn't trust its human to be a good pack leader becomes unbalanced and often exhibits unwanted or anti-social behaviors. Cesar does not ‘train’ dogs in the sense of teaching them commands...he rehabilitates unbalanced dogs and helps ‘re-train’ their owners to better understand how to see the world through a dog's eyes. Cesar counsels people to calmly, assertively, and consistently give their dogs rules, boundaries and limitations to establish themselves as solid pack leaders and to help correct and control unwanted behavior. He doesn't believe in ‘quick fixes,’ even though changing some behaviors can appear to happen in a relatively short period of time. None of those changes will ‘stick,’ however, unless the human acts consistently with his/her dog every day to keep unwanted behaviors from returning. In Cesar's opinion, no one should ever hit or yell at a dog to correct unwanted behavior.”<sup>3</sup>

Find a person with a balanced dog and I think that person is ready to become a parent or even a classroom teacher. Certainly kids are not dogs, but the calm assertive tone Cesar demonstrates as vital to the dog-human relationship is equally as vital in the classroom. A class is a pack and I have to be ready to be the pack leader and lead my students to learning. More often than not, adolescents walk in the door unbalanced, insecure, and unfocused. It is my job to balance each of them. To do so, I cannot be unbalanced or insecure myself, or I might lash out, become domineering and confrontational, or give up my leadership. When I set a calm and assertive tone, I can better observe, address behavior issues, and focus my pack.

## **2 – Build and Protect Relationships**

When asked why she opened her multi-million dollar leadership academy for girls in South Africa rather than in the United States, Oprah Winfrey said it was because South Africans valued education. The inner-city American kids she had met did not. Given the chance, American kids preferred new tennis shoes and an iPod more than the opportunity to learn.<sup>4</sup> She's right. The desire to and ability learn may be innate, but what kids want to learn – the content – is dictated by culture, and in our American culture, kids are superficial, self-interested, fast food-eating, technophile, consumerist junkies. They may not get all they see or think they deserve, but they sure do want it. School, I am very glad to say, does not offer a lot of what our media-driven society trains kids to want, but the fact that it doesn't often makes teaching difficult.

Some teachers and curricula try to get around this lack of desire by presenting school content in formats kids like – computer games and flashy videos with lots of loud hip hop in the background – but I believe in face time, not more screen time. Too much screen time is part of what has created this mess and more of the same will not get us out of it. What kids want more than fast food or iPods or tennis shoes is a basic human need. Relationships. Certainly they want relationships with each other, but they also want relationships with adults, be it parents, people in the community, or teachers. No matter how boring the content, relationships will keep kids coming.

So, in creating a climate of good classroom discipline, building a sound relationship foundation between yourself and the class is important. I share a lot about myself from day one and, while I am clear about teacher-student boundaries, I make sure I show a genuine interest in what the kids think is important – MySpace, for instance, or grills (the tooth variety), or fencing. When a kid wants to share something with me, I make sure I sit down, make eye contact, and am open. I may not agree and I may think it's weird, but I am present. The same goes for working with parents. And in developing relationships with parents and students alike, trust is a non-negotiable. My students and their families have to trust that I have their best interests at heart, rather than my own, that I come to school for them, not the curriculum and not just because it's a paycheck. I have to believe what I am teaching is important because I have to transmit that belief to them and they have to believe it, too. I must have passion and interest in order to inspire the same. That's one of the reasons I believe teachers must be able to choose and tailor their instructional methods and material. Passionless teaching kills relationships.

Whatever I do in the classroom, the focus is on building rather than retarding my relationship with students, especially when it comes to discipline. Different teachers do this different ways. Some teachers work with the students to come up with class rules. Some teachers hold class meetings to handle discipline issues. They may work for you, but I don't use these strategies. I establish the need for class discipline early on in discussion with my students, share the steps of my discipline plan and the reasoning behind them, and then follow the system, talking a lot with and making adjustments for individual students as necessary throughout the year. I do write down kids' names in my personal notes during a class. The class knows I am doing it and they know I may talk to the noted students about behavior after class. I spend the time to talk with my classes a lot about discipline. No check marks on the board or public behavior charts. I don't have the rules posted in the room. It's not about the rules, it's not about documenting, it's about the relationship. Talking is important. When I talk to individual students about behavior, I first listen, then I speak in a calm assertive manner. In these talks, I try to appeal to students as the people I know they can and want to be.

It's important in building and protecting relationships to remember what our role is. I am not in the relationship to be a parent or a friend to my students. I am a teacher and, most of all, that's what they need me to be. On my side, even though I invest a great deal of myself in the relationship, it is not personal. I know I am also teaching relationship building and maintenance to my students in our interactions, and to do that I have to stand back a little. Adolescents are often dictated by their emotions and they will bring that mercurial nature into their relationship with you. They will lie to you. They will hate you. They will love you more than the teacher down the hall. They will test and need and threaten you. They will try to wear you down. Don't be surprised. Through all of that, though, they need you to be steadfast, consistent, and unchanging in your regard and appreciation of them as people and the people they will become. We cannot teach if we are in the relationship for ourselves.

### **3 – Don't Put It on Parents**

I have a great deal of respect for the families of students, but I don't count on parents, especially those whose own lives are out of control, to be able to control a child's behavior at school. For many kids, there is a clear disconnect between what happens at home and what happens at school. In the context of school, some kids are better behaved. Many others are not. Discussion about discipline and behavior with parents is always helpful because I am able to build more of a relationship with the student's family, get to know my students better, and help parents and caregivers see and know their children better. In these discussions, I always encourage parents to talk with their children about school, about goals, about appropriate behavior, because I know that is the job of the parent and one that sometimes gets lost in the daily frenzy. In calling or emailing a parent, however, I do not count on that parent to be able to make anything happen in my classroom.

Although they can't always affect my classroom and I can't always affect what happens at home, contact is important. It's a data exchange we both need. By the time their kids hit eighth grade, parents are often operating in an information vacuum, whether they know it or not. Some parents just don't ask, but even if they did, most kids would tell them as little as possible, especially when it comes to school. During almost every one of the parent conferences I have participated in over the last ten years, parents have said that their children tell them every night that all their homework is done. They always seem astounded when I tell them differently. The number one rule to remember about middle schoolers is that they will tell you what you want to hear, whether it is true or not, particularly when it relates to their interests and time. Middle school children are adept at subterfuge and misinformation and so, if parents are getting any information at all from their children, chances are that it is colored by what that child wants the parent to hear. If not a complete picture, your contact offers parents the opportunity to fill in gaps, compare notes, and see the child from a fresh perspective.

### **4 – Stand Back and Reflect**

I always wonder if everyone's school day is as hectic and crazy as a typical day at my school. One morning my husband, an architect, came to work with me because he needed something from my classroom. In the ten minutes it took to get from the parking lot to the Office, to my box in the teacher workroom, and down the stairs to my classroom, fifteen people asked me questions, five of them needing something desperately by the end of the day. All this before the kids even walked in the room, calling my name, asking for pencils, telling me about their homework issues, trying to smack the kid in front of them. My husband was impressed, quickly backed out the door, went to work and started his day by saying hello to his colleagues over a leisurely cup of tea. Teaching...the life. It is an unending barrage from 7:30 am to end of my last meeting of the day.

In this sort of environment, it is easy to react to student behavior from one's emotions rather than intellect. But it is vital that we keep our emotional balance in the turmoil and focus on molding behavior from a place of calm and direction, because discipline has direction with an end goal in mind. I write down the names of kids I need to talk to about behavior during class so I can take to time to reflect and meet with them sometime after class, when I can focus on them, they are

removed from the moment, we can consult my discipline log, and make plans for the future. This sounds like it would take a long time, but it doesn't have to, especially when I have met with a student multiple times. Of course, I cannot allow a student's unproductive behavior to continue disrupting learning during class, so if it continues I need a plan for removal. I have tried lots of things over the year – time-out contracts, time-out spaces, sending kids to another teacher's room, making a special arrangement with the administration. Whatever it is, it is important for the kid to know I don't want him or her to leave, but that my classroom is about learning, right now they're not about learning, and that we will talk later.

Surrounded by people as emotionally charged as they are in a hurried environment with limited supervision, middle schoolers are like addicts in a heroin shop. To resist going for the gossip, drama, and positive or negative attention of their peers is an amazing feat of self-control and character for early teens. When they slip, they need time to sit back and think. The after class meeting is essential for this. Sometimes they can do it alone and in writing, but I've found that some guidance from me is generally needed, so the student-teacher talk is important. In the moment, however, as class rolls we must remember that talk is cheap. Calm assertiveness does not involve calling a kid's name multiple times to stop a behavior or threatening or warning ad infinitum. Use talk when it is valuable - while addressing a whole class or with a student removed from the moment, alone and reflecting. When you find yourself yapping away at a student, know that you are being ignored, and try something else.

## **5 - Punish When Necessary**

Our school discipline plan has five consequences when a student misbehaves. In ascending order, they are student/teacher conference, classroom intervention (move seat, time-out, etc.), home contact, team referral (for which a detention is assigned), and administrator referral (for which multiple detentions, ISS, or OSS are assigned). While they are generally used as punishment, any of these steps can be used for discipline depending on how they are enforced. If you practice a calm, assertive manner, build and protect relationships with your students and their families, and take the time to reflect and have your students reflect, there is still no guarantee that every student will behave appropriately every day. Forget it. You are going to do everything you can do to keep kids in your classroom so they can learn and grow. But sometimes, the forces that drive them are bigger, badder, and more entrenched than you can overcome. Establish rules and consequences, preferably in tandem with your teaching team and administrator, and follow them. Use consequences to teach discipline whenever possible, but use them even when you can't. They are there to keep you and your students focused on learning.

And students know that, even the troubled and trouble-causing ones. Deep down, they really do want to learn and they know it's wrong to distract their friends from learning. Deep down, they don't want complete freedom. They want boundaries. I want them to want consequences because when they accept consequences, it shows they take responsibility for their actions. Whenever I can, in our talks as we consult over past discussions and look at the discipline log, I ask my kids to punish themselves – develop their own interventions, do the parent contact themselves, even write their own referrals. What consequence will help you remember not to do that next time? That's been done, where are you now?

For the last couple of years, I have been acting as a kind of discipline dean<sup>5</sup> for my team. I am the fourth step in our discipline plan consequences, the team referral. All team referrals come through me, to be reflected on, to be logged into the student's discipline history, and to be punished with an in-school detention. My detention is an hour and a half, silent, boring – not something our students want or like to do. No communicating, no reading, no sleeping. They are doing time, a punishment for whatever transgression is written out on the referral form from their teacher that I share with them. At the end of the hour and a half, I sign off on the referral, give a copy to my administrator, a copy to the teacher, and a copy to the student. I tell them not to be referred again for that behavior. To date, one-third of our 330 eighth graders have served a detention for behavior with me. About 39% of them are generally referred again for similar behavior. 16% are referred again for other inappropriate behaviors. For the other 45%, one detention is enough.<sup>6</sup>

During the detention, I ask but do not require students to complete a reflection on the referral and write a letter to the referring teacher about what happened. I ask this more for the teacher than for the student because I suspect they haven't necessarily talked, even though a student-teacher conference is the first of our team discipline consequences. I want to give students the opportunity to say what they need to say, and give their teachers the opportunity to listen and reflect out of the moment. I want to support my colleagues and this is one way I can do that. I offer the next step, something to do when you have had enough of a kid's behavior. And I don't hurt the kids or their relationships with their teachers – I am not mean or aggressive. I do not step over or try to explain my colleagues' referrals to their students. I use my calm assertiveness to give students and their teachers space, and I hope the student's reflection helps his or her teacher build a better relationship. But I cannot assume that the punishment inflicted by my detention changes behavior in most students.

Occasionally, I talk with a student about a referral, what happened, and next steps. When they're listening, sometimes I give advice about how students might improve their relationships with their teachers. I suspect that talk, that discipline, works better than the detention itself.

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<sup>1</sup> This was a column from the Charlotte Observer, cut out and pinned up in the Piedmont copy room a couple years ago. I am probably adding to the list of social and attention skills the writer listed, but the main point is definitely the same.

<sup>2</sup> Impulsivity due to adolescents' continuing brain development during the teen years is well-documented and cited throughout the literature, particularly as it relates to underage drinking and juvenile delinquency. For an example, see the American Bar Association's Juvenile Justice Center January 2004 report, "Adolescence, Brain Development and Legal Culpability," at <http://www.abanet.org/crimjust/juvjus/Adolescence.pdf> (located 2/6/2007).

<sup>3</sup> See [www.dogpsychologycenter.com](http://www.dogpsychologycenter.com) (quote copied and edited for grammar 2/6/2007)

<sup>4</sup> Wulff, Jennifer and Mike Lipton. "'These Are My Dream Girls.'" People, 15 January 2007. 52-56.

<sup>5</sup> Walker, Tim. "The Discipline Dean." NEAToday, February 2007. 38-40.

<sup>6</sup> Break-down of 2006-2007 Piedmont Eighth Grade Team detention database up to 2/6/2007; tardies are excluded. It is interesting to note that only 18% of our 330 students were referred up to three times, and that fewer than 7% were referred more than three times.