Beyond Discipline (*)
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A few years ago, I received a letter from a woman who was working on a book about a progressive educator. She said she was considering devoting a chapter of her manuscript to a discussion of a program called Assertive Discipline, which was at best only indirectly related to her subject. But she knew my stomach reacted the same way hers did to the sight of marbles in a jar, or a hierarchical list of punishments on a classroom wall, and she wanted me to let her know whether I thought it was worth the effort.

It didn’t seem a particularly complicated question, and yet the more I thought about it, the more I found my response shifting. At first, I was simply going to say “Hell, yes! Help the hundreds of thousands of teachers who have been exposed to this program to reflect on how pernicious it really is.” Assertive Discipline, after all, is essentially a collection of bribes and threats whose purpose is to enforce rules that the teacher alone devises and imposes. The point, in effect, is to make sure that students, when they act the way we want, they are obeying our dictates rather than making free choices in the marketplace of ideas.

No wonder the advice of Rudolf Dreikurs and his followers often seems interchangeable with that of Lee Canter. For example, if a student argues with the teacher, no one would mind if the teacher struck the right tone by saying “Each student who violates a rule [must] write his own name on the blackboard”–or, in another approach, must have his name written there by an elected class “sheriff” who “is responsible for keeping the behavioral orders.” (R. Curwin and A.N. Mendler, Discipline with Dignity)

Is it more reasonable to make a child stand for the rest of the period than, say, for the rest of the week? Unquestionably. It is also more reasonable to paddle a child than to shoot him, but this does not offer much of an argument for paddling. Is there a connection between tipping back a chair and not being able to sit in it? Yes, but does it really matter to the child? The issue is not the specific features of the punitive response so much as the punishment itself: “You didn’t do what I wanted, so now I’m going to make something unpleasant happen to you.” We would not expect the child to be less resentful (or less likely to retaliate) just because the teacher used what amounts to Punishment Lite.

In trying to answer the woman who was considering a chapter about Assertive Discipline, I came to conclude that the problem is not just with his program but with the use of rewards and punishments per se, regardless of what they are called or how they are embellished. Even when children are “successfully” reinforced or consequenced into compliance, they will likely feel no commitment to what they are doing, no deep understanding of the act and its rationale, no sense of themselves as the kind of person who would want to act this way in the future. They have been led to concentrate on the consequences of their actions to themselves, and someone with this frame of reference bears little resemblance to the kind of person we dream of seeing each of our students become.

Gradually, though, I began to wonder whether even this was the last word. Rewards and punishments are instruments for controlling people, and the real problem, I began to suspect, was the belief that the teacher should be in control of the classroom. If all these discipline programs disappeared from schools, teachers might still be free to work on students to learn how to make that happen.

This recognition offered a fresh angle on looking at my own experiences as a classroom teacher, and at what I had seen in countless classrooms over the last few years. Students are far less likely to act aggressively, intrusively, or obnoxiously in places where the teacher is not concerned with being in charge-and, indeed, is not particularly interested in controlling their misbehavior. I realized that the discipline problems I had experienced with some of my own classes were not a function of children who were insufficiently controlled but of a curriculum that was insufficiently engaging.

The students weren’t trying to make my life miserable; they were trying to make the time pass faster. It occurred to me that books on discipline almost never raise the possibility that when a student doesn’t do what he is told, the problem may be with what he has been told to do-or to learn. Of course, not everyone makes sense of the teacher’s efforts to control them in such a way. Even if such a teacher is well-intentioned and continuing problems in a strongly controlled classroom-especially when she was absent—that might lead her to blame the students and to answer with more discipline, tougher consequences, tighter regulation. And the worse things got, the more “unrealistic” it would seem to her to give up control, the less likely that she would consider bringing the students in on the process of thinking about the kind of classroom that they would like to have, and how to make that happen.

No wonder the advice of Rudolf Dreikurs and his colleagues often seems interchangeable with that of Lee Canter. For example, if a student argues with anything we say, Dreikurs advises us to do the following: “First, you simply reply, ‘You may have a point.’ Second, you do whatever you think is right.” (R. Dreikurs and P. Cassel, Discipline Without Tears; R. Dreikurs’ Assertive Discipline recommends Dreikurs’ work and quotes from it. Dreikurs may have talked about democracy, but what he apparently meant was the use of meetings and other “modern” techniques to get students to do what they are told: “It is autocratic to force, but democratic to induce compliance,” he and his colleagues wrote. (R. Dreikurs et al., Maintaining Sanity in the Classroom, 2nd ed.)

Classroom management programs invariably urge teachers to begin by taking control and laying out their expectations for student behavior along with what will be done to those who disobey. But no child ever became more likely to think for himself, or to care about others, in such an environment. To “manage” students’ behavior, to make them do what we say, doesn’t promote community or compassion, responsibility or reflection. The only way to reach those goals is to give up some control, to facilitate the tricky, noisy, maddening, unpredictable process whereby students work together to decide what respects mean or how to be fair.

Of course, you can get a child to recite “We should keep our hands and feet to ourselves” by repeating this enough times or posting it on the wall, just as you can get him to recite “To divide by a fraction, turn it upside down and multiply.” You can get a child to stop slugging someone else (at least, in your presence) by threatening to punish him if he continues, just as you can get him to pick out the topic sentence of a paragraph. But the first examples in each pair don’t suggest someone who is developing intellectually, morally, any more than the latter examples suggest someone who is developing intellectually.

To help students become ethical people, as opposed to people who merely do what they are told, we cannot merely tell them what to do. We have to help them figure out-for themselves and with each other-what one ought to act. That’s why dropping the tools of traditional discipline, like rewards and consequences, is only the beginning. It’s even more crucial that we explore the consequences of getting along with others, and instead involve students in devising and justifying ethical principles.

And that’s why I suggested to my correspondent that a critique of Assertive Discipline made a lot of sense-as long as it was more than a critique of Assertive Discipline. For more on this topic, please see the book Beyond Discipline.