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ABSTRACT

As complaints about the lack of discipline in schools increase, more educators are turning to student conduct codes as one component of a discipline program. In setting up an effective conduct code, the top priority should be clear communication of rules. To ensure this, all relevant parties--administrators, teachers, parents, and students--should be represented when schoolwide rules are being developed. At the classroom level, teachers and students should work together to create a code consisting of no more than five or six rules consistent with schoolwide policies. Behaviors can be dealt with in three ways: (1) reinforced; (2) dealt with using constructive alternatives to punishment; or (3) punished. Rules are not followed unless consequences are applied for complying with them and for violating them. However, if too many behaviors have punitive consequences, the punishment loses its effectiveness. At the same time, tangible reinforcements for rule-following behavior should be gradually phased out--so that such behavior will become a habit not dependent on reward. Selection of the actual consequences of bad behavior to be used in the classroom should involve student input and administrative approval, and must allow for individual student differences and promote equity. The discipline program should be reviewed and revised as necessary each year. (KH)

CONSTRUCTIVE DISCIPLINE

G. Roy Mayer

Recent annual Gallup Polls of public opinion consistently have identified the lack of discipline as the single most important complaint about public schools. Consequently, many educators are turning to student conduct codes as one component of a discipline program for dealing with behavior problems. At the very least, discipline codes list dos and don'ts, or the behavioral standards required of students. Many also specify consequences for rule violations. They are designed to influence how students behave and how teachers and administrators respond to rule violations. A well designed discipline code also can help improve the school climate. Thus, this paper offers guidelines for educators in developing constructive discipline codes.

Developing and Communicating Rules

Communicating clearly the rules of a conduct code is a major step in setting up an effective discipline program. This step not only makes sense but frequently is required by law. For example, Section 35291 of the California Education Code requires that the principal of each school "take steps to insure that all rules pertaining to the discipline of pupils are communicated to continuing students at the beginning of each school year, and to transfer students at the time of their enrollment in the school." Too often we assume that school discipline standards are understood or that students already know how to behave. Furthermore, we frequently communicate standards indirectly rather than directly, a matter which often results in students learning the rules through trial and error.

We can take several actions to increase the likelihood that rules will be communicated clearly. First, all relevant parties--including administrators, counselors, psychologists, teachers, parents, and students--should be represented when schoolwide rules are being developed. Rules tend to be better accepted, understood, supported, and enforced when all concerned parties have been represented in drawing up a conduct code. Once an initial draft of the schoolwide rules and consequences has been developed, it should be shared. A mechanism for broadly based community input is needed. A draft, including formulated consequences, can be circulated to all staff, students, and parents for additional comments. A legal review of the document also is necessary before a final draft is drawn up by the committee for final administrative approval.

Students also should be involved in the development of classroom rules. The final behavior code in each classroom should include no more than five or six rules and should be coordinated with schoolwide policies. The list should be kept simple and to the point, and each rule should be stated positively, rather than negatively. A positive list will guide students in how to behave in preference to how not to behave--a more instructive and less suppressive approach. Once developed, the classroom rules should be shared with and approved by the responsible administrator(s). A set of classroom rules, then, might include the following: (1) Bring books, pencil, and paper; (2) Be in your seat when tardy bell rings; (3) Listen carefully; (4) Follow directions; (5) Complete assignments; and, (6) Show courtesy and respect to others.

After approval has been obtained, the rules should be taught to all involved parties--namely, to staff members and students. It is helpful to present classroom and schoolwide rules both visually and orally to students to promote communication and reduce misunderstandings. Classroom rules can be displayed prominently on a poster, printed in handout form, and copied by students in their notebooks. For preschool and primary pupils, and for retarded adolescents, it is helpful to role-play each rule as part of the explanatory process. Schoolwide rules for older students can be printed in a student handbook and discussed in class. Both classroom and schoolwide rules should be reviewed orally at regular intervals, and constructive changes should be made when necessary. In summary, students must be helped to learn the code of conduct, not just given a paper or booklet about it.

Continued parental support is important for classroom and schoolwide rules to be effective. Therefore, the final draft also must be communicated to parents. At the classroom level, this usually is accomplished by a letter sent home with students by the classroom teacher describing the classroom rules. It also is helpful to request that the parents sign the letter to indicate that they agree to the rules and have discussed them with their youngsters. Using this form of communication, it then will be clear that parents have received a copy of the rules and that they support them. At the school level, similar correspondence is appropriate. A letter to the home detailing the school's conduct code can clarify the rules, help to avoid misunderstandings, and solicit increased parental support.

Selecting Positive Consequences for Following Rules

After the rules have been jointly established and posted, students must be given positive recognition for acting in accord with them. Rules are not followed unless consequences are applied both for complying with them and for violating them.

Individuals learn to behave differently in different settings because of their varied experiences, or the consequences which accrue, in those settings. For example, students learn to raise their hands in Ms. Smith's classroom because she only recognizes students who have their hands up, but they learn to speak out freely in Ms. Freebee's classroom because she sometimes recognizes students who speak out. Discriminations as to how to behave, then, often develop due to the consequences that students experience in the presence of their teachers.

When rule-following behavior is reinforced, the environment soon will cue an individual to behave according to the rules. The environment signals that if you raise your hand before speaking in Ms. Smith's classroom, you are likely to receive reinforcement. Thus, when reinforcement is provided for following rules such as hand-raising, that behavior becomes the accepted pattern, or habit, in that particular setting. However, if rule-following behavior is not reinforced or recognized, it eventually will cease.

The actual selection of consequences, whether they be positive or negative, should involve students. Several studies (Fixsen, Phillips, &

Wolf, 1973; Lovitt & Curtiss, 1969) have shown that when students are involved in selecting their own reinforcers for following the rules and likewise are involved in selecting their own consequences for rule violations, they abide by the rules more and report more rule violations than when the consequences are determined by educators or parents. Parents too, of course, should be involved in selecting consequences at the school level to promote additional support and improved school-home communications.

Phasing Out Reinforcement and Reminders

Students soon will learn the rules if the conduct code is posted in a prominent place, is reviewed periodically, and if consequences consistently are provided for both violating and abiding by the rules. Once students appear to know the rules, as evidenced by their compliance with them, it is important to begin gradually phasing out the positive consequences so that rule-following behavior will become habit--an intrinsic activity not dependent on reward. This is particularly important if tangible items are used as incentives because more natural reinforcers are not effective or meaningful to the youngster involved. These contrived reinforcers should be replaced gradually by the reinforcers indigenous to the situation or the activity being learned. For example, if tickets, ice cream, certificates, or award assemblies are provided once a week initially, they should be replaced gradually by more natural reinforcers, such as praise and recognition, as the intrusive reinforcers are phased back to twice a week a couple of times, then to once a month several times, then perhaps to once every other month or semester. It is important not to stop the incentives abruptly. If an abrupt cutoff occurs, or if incentives are phased out too quickly, then the desired behavior may disintegrate. If adherence to the rules begins to fade, back up a bit and offer the incentives more frequently again; then phase out the incentives more gradually than before.

As students learn the rules and find that following them is the way to behave at school, fewer reminders will be needed. Reminders, then, like incentives, should be phased out gradually. Some teachers may combine rules at this time and post must general statements, such as, "Bring supplies, pay attention and behave appropriately". As adherence continues to the classroom rules, a visual presentation of the rules is no longer necessary.

Handling Infractions

Enforcing discipline codes is everyone's responsibility. In particular, teachers and administrators need to depend on one another's support. An administrator must know what disciplinary steps were taken by a teacher before that teacher decided to send a student to the administrator's office. A teacher must know what actions will be taken by the administrator when a student is sent to the office.

Avoid Using Punishment for All Infractions

Traditionally, educators have relied on a dyadic model: They reinforce desire behavior and punish infractions. It is now apparent that this two-part model is no longer adequate for a number of reasons.

First, use of the traditional model fosters a heavy reliance on punishment. As a result the school environment has become excessively punitive. For example, Brodinsky (1980) has shown that school districts spend more time and energy in implementing punitive measure than preventive or positive measures. Similarly, many teachers have been observed to use disapproval three times more frequently than approval when they respond to student behavior (Heller & White, 1975; Thomas, Presland, Grant, & Glen, 1978; White, 1975). Thus, when punishment is applied to most all infractions, the school climate can become overly punitive, particularly for students who engage in a variety of misbehaviors. Further, when punishment is applied frequently over extended

periods of time, as would be necessary for a wide range of misbehaviors, it loses its effectiveness. For example, spanking soon loses its effectiveness for a child who is spanked at home for every major and minor infraction. Thus, punishment should not be used on all misbehaviors.

Punitive consequences for infractions can provoke aggression, destruction of property, and escape behaviors (Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 1977). For example, when small children get spanked by a parent, they often go off and sulk by themselves or respond by hitting a younger sibling, the parents, or any other handy person or object. Parents who have been punished--i.e., criticized--at work may take it out on their families or attempt to isolate themselves for a while. A student, after being punished verbally or physically by a teacher, may fight back by destroying school property or fighting with others. Of course, not all students respond to a punitive environment with aggression or retaliation. Some attempt to escape by being tardy or truant, by tuning out in a class, or by dropping out of school. Overly punitive environments, then, foster vandalism, violence, tardiness, truancy, and dropping out of school. The use of punishment must be restricted to major infractions.

One advantage that dyadic discipline systems do have is being able to inform everyone as to what the consequences of their action will be. But, using the same consequence (e.g., isolation) or sequence (e.g., first a warning, then isolation, home contact and finally referral) on everyone's behavior has several disadvantages. First of all, these systems are based on the misconception that everyone should be treated equally. However, it is said that there is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals. Individual differences and affirmative equity, then, are disregarded. For example, some students have been known to work hard (i.e., engage in infractions) in order to stay after school rather than go to an empty or punitive home. Similarly, isolation or timeout frequently is listed as the punitive consequence for specific behavior. If the classroom environment is punitive for several students, the teacher will be teaching them to misbehave by isolating or removing them from the punitive classroom situation for their misbehavior. For example, if they have a history of failure in math, they might learn that they don't have to do math if they throw spitwads because, for misbehaving, they are sent out of the math class. Though isolation may work to reduce the misbehavior of most students in the math class, it, like any other negative or positive procedure, does not have the same effect on each student's behavior. Because of differences among individuals, then, the same consequence will not reduce the same infraction by every student.

Another disadvantage to providing a sequence of increasingly punitive consequences, starting with a warning, is that it often communicates to certain students that they can get by with at least one infraction and they may behave accordingly. If punitive procedures are being used as they should--namely, only on non-tolerable behaviors--then it is best not to warn or to threaten but to punish immediately.

Use a Triadic Model

An alternative and more effective method than traditional dyatic models is the triadic behavioral framework illustrated in Figure 1. As with the dyadic models, appropriate reinforcing consequences, ones that increase or maintain the occurrence of the behavior, should be selected and used on rule following behaviors. Punitive consequences, such as isolation, penalties, scolding, referral, suspension, restitution and expulsion, are reserved for major or serious infractions. However, for the minor infractions, constructive alternatives are used to reduce their occurrence. Constructive alternatives include: (1) Reinforcing target students for engaging in desirable alternatives to infractions, such as picking up messes, raising hand, and completing assigned work; (2) Reinforcing other students who are engaging in appropriate rule-following behavior so that their behavior will serve as a

model for those engaged in minor infractions; (3) Reinforcing target students for engaging in a reduced rate of the undesirable behavior, such as fewer absences, less litter, and fewer blurt-outs; and (4) Reinforcing target students for not engaging in the undesirable behavior, such as not fighting during the day, not being tardy, and not blurting out. Many of these strategies are illustrated elsewhere (Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 1977; 1985).

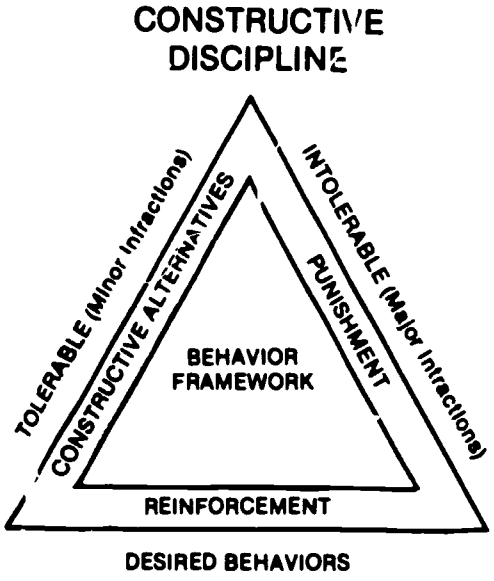

Figure 1 The Triadic Model

This triadic model is more effective for several reasons. First, it uses constructive alternatives, rather than punitive consequences, on minor infractions. This has the advantages of making the school and classroom climates less punitive and more positive--resulting in a more positive learning climate with less vandalism, violence, and attendance problems (Mayer, Butterworth, Natpaktitis, & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1983; Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 1985). Also, when we need to use punishment it is more likely to work effectively to reduce serious infractions because it will not have been overused.

Educators using constructive disciplines recognize that the same consequence, whether reinforcing or punitive will not have the same affect on each student. Thus, they choose from a variety of jointly selected consequences to allow for individual differences. If a student should ask, "Why did you isolate me for 15 minutes for throwing a spitwad while you only fined Jim 3 points for doing the same thing?"--be honest. Explain: "I didn't fine you 3 points because fines don't work for you, but they do work to stop Jim's misbehavior. Similarly, to reward you, I allowed you to work with Jane on that project, but with Jim I allowed him to work on his homework. Would you prefer to work on your homework rather than work with Jane? You see, that's the point. You and Jim are different individuals, so how can I treat you the same?" With this approach, then, ethnic and minority groups are not treated differently from other groups. Each individual is recognized as unique. Such uniqueness is often over-looked when we group or categorize people. Constructive discipline, then, fosters true educational equity.

Finally, if an infraction should occur, a warning is not given for several reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, a warning can serve as an invitation to misbehavior. Second, the students were involved in the development and selection of the rules and consequences. The rules and consequences also were posted and periodically reviewed. Thus, the students should know them. To stop a misbehavior, then, it is best to deliver the selected consequence immediately following each time it occurs.

Conclusions

A framework for designing classroom and schoolwide behavior codes, or discipline programs, was presented. The first step involved determining a set of specific rules, using students input and administrative approval at the classroom level, and using student and parent input at the school level.

Rules should be stated positively, posted in a prominent place, and periodically reviewed.

Students are not likely to follow rules

unless there are consequences for both complying with the rules and for violating them.

However, as discussed, if too many behaviors receive punitive consequences, the punishment loses its effectiveness. Thus, a triadic framework was presented by which behaviors may be categorized. It lists behaviors that can be: (1) reinforced, (2) dealt with using constructive alternatives to punishment, or (3) punished.

As with the specification of rules, selection of the actual consequences to be used in the classroom should involve student input and administrative approval. Input by students, parents, and teachers should be sought at the school level. Educators must choose from a variety of jointly selected consequences to allow for individual student differences and to promote better educational equity. Once a specific consequence is selected for an infraction, it should be applied immediately and consistently.

The discipline program should be reviewed and revised as necessary each year. Each student group is different. Revisions likely will be necessary because of these differences and because of staff changes. Moreover, continuing student and staff involvement in the selection of rules and consequences is necessary for a program to remain effective.

We now can do more than just punish or ignore infractions. The constructive discipline approach can be applied in our schools. =

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