Assertive Discipline: More than Names on the Board and Marbles in a Jar
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Assertive Discipline — More Than Names on the Board and Marbles in a Jar

Mr. Canter explains the background of the program and addresses some of the issues that are frequently raised about Assertive Discipline.

BY LEE CANTER

ABOUT A YEAR ago I was on an airline flight, seated next to a university professor. When he found out that I had developed the Assertive Discipline program, he said, "Oh, that's where all you do is write the kids' names on the board when they're bad and drop marbles in the jar when they're good."

The university professor's response disturbed me. For some time I've been concerned about a small percentage of educators — this professor apparently among them — who have interpreted my program in a way that makes behavior management sound simplistic. More important, I'm concerned with their misguided emphasis on providing only negative consequences when students misbe-

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The key to Assertive Discipline is catching students being good — and letting them know that you like it.

assertive; that is, they taught students how to behave. They established clear rules for the classroom, they communicated those rules to the students, and they taught the students how to follow them. These effective teachers had also mastered skills in positive reinforcement, and they praised every student at least once a day. Finally, when students chose to break the rules, these teachers used firm and consistent negative consequences — but only as a last resort.

It troubles me to find my work interpreted as suggesting that teachers need only provide negative consequences — check marks or demerits — when students misbehave. That interpretation is wrong. The key to Assertive Discipline is catching students being good: recognizing and supporting them when they behave appropriately and letting them know you like it, day in and day out.

THE DISCIPLINE PLAN

It is vital for classroom teachers to have a systematic discipline plan that explains exactly what will happen when students choose to misbehave. By telling the students at the beginning of the school year what the consequences will be, teachers insure that all students know what to expect in the classroom. Without a plan, teachers must choose an appropriate consequence at the moment when a student misbehaves. They must stop the lesson, talk to the misbehaving student, and do whatever else the situation requires, while 25 to 30 students look on. That is not an effective way to teach — or to deal with misbehavior.

Most important, without a plan teachers tend to be inconsistent. One day they may ignore students who are talking, yelling, or disrupting the class. The next day they may severely discipline students for the same behaviors. In addition, teachers may respond differently to students from different socioeconomic, ethnic, or racial backgrounds.

An effective discipline plan is applied fairly to all students. Every student who willfully disrupts the classroom and stops the teacher from teaching suffers the same consequence. And a written plan can be sent home to parents, who then know beforehand what the teacher's standards are and what will be done when students choose to misbehave. When a teacher calls a parent, there should be no surprises.

MISBEHAVIOR AND CONSEQUENCES

I suggest that a discipline plan include a maximum of five consequences for misbehavior, but teachers must choose consequences with which they are comfortable. For example, the first time a student breaks a rule, the student is warned. The second infraction brings a 10-minute timeout; the third infraction, a 15-minute timeout. The fourth time a student breaks a rule, the teacher calls the parents; the fifth time, the student goes to the principal.

No teacher should have a plan that is not appropriate for his or her needs and that is not in the best interests of the students. Most important, the consequences should never be psychologically or physically harmful to the students. Students should never be made to stand in front of the class as objects of ridicule or be degraded in any other way. Nor should they be given consequences that are inappropriate for their grade levels. I also feel strongly that corporal punishment should never be administered. There are more effective ways of dealing with students than hitting them.

Names and checks on the board are sometimes said to be essential to an Assertive Discipline program, but they are not. I originally suggested this particular practice because I had seen teachers interrupt their lessons to make such negative comments to misbehaving students as “You talked out again. I’ve had it. You’re impossible. That’s 20 minutes after school.” I wanted to eliminate the need to stop the lesson and issue reprimands. Writing a student’s name on the board
would warn the student in a calm, non-
degrading manner. It would also provide
a record-keeping system for the teacher.

Unfortunately, some parents have mis-
interpreted the use of names and checks
on the board as a way of humiliating stu-
dents. I now suggest that teachers instead
write an offending student's name on a
clipboard or in the roll book and say to
the student, "You talked out, you disrupt-
ed the class, you broke a rule. That's a
warning. That's a check."

In addition to parents, some teachers
have misinterpreted elements of the As-
sertive Discipline program. The vast ma-
majority of teachers — my staff and I have
probably trained close to 750,000 teach-
ners — have used the program to dramat-
ically increase their reliance on positive
reinforcement and verbal praise. But a
small percentage of teachers have inter-
preted the program in a negative manner.

There are several reasons for this.
First, Assertive Discipline has become a
generic term, like Xerox or Kleenex. A
number of educators are now conducting
training in what they call Assertive Dis-
cipline without teaching all the competen-
ties essential to my program. For exam-
ple, I have heard reports of teachers who
were taught that they had only to stand
in front of their students, tell them that
there were rules and consequences, dis-
play a chart listing those rules and con-
sequences, and write the names of mis-
behaving students on the board. That was
it. These teachers were never introduced
to the concept that positive reinforcement
is the key to dealing with students. Such
programs are not in the best interests of
students.

Negative interpretations have also come
from burned-out, overwhelmed teachers
who feel they do not get the support
that they need from parents or adminis-
trators and who take out their frustrations
on students. Assertive Discipline is not a
negative program, but it can be misused
by negative teachers. The answer is not
to change the program, but to change the
teachers. We need to train administra-
tors, mentor teachers, and staff devel-
opers to coach negative teachers in the
use of positive reinforcement. If these
teachers cannot become more positive,
they should not be teaching.

**POSITIVE DISCIPLINE**

I recommend a three-step cycle of be-

davior management to establish a posi-
tive discipline system.

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**Whenever teachers want students to follow certain directions, they must teach the specific behaviors.**

First, whenever teachers want students to follow certain directions, they must *teach* the specific behaviors. Teachers too often assume that students know how they are expected to behave. Teachers first need to establish specific directions for each activity during the day — lectures, small-group work, transitions be-
tween activities, and so forth. For each situation, teachers must determine the *exact* behaviors they expect from the stu-
dents.

For example, teachers may want stu-
dents to stay in their seats during a lec-
ture, focusing their eyes on the lecturer,
clearing their desks of all material ex-
cept paper and pencil, raising their hands
when they have questions or comments,
and waiting to be called on before speak-
ing. Once teachers have determined the
specific behaviors for each situation, they
must *teach* the students how to follow the
directions. They must first state the direc-
tions and, with younger students, write
the behaviors on the board or on a flip chart. Then they must model the be-
haviors, ask the students to *restate* the
directions, question the students to make
sure they understand the directions, and
immediately engage the students in the
activity to make sure that they understand
the directions.

Second, after teaching the specific
directions, teachers — especially at the
elementary level — must use *positive rep-
tition* to reinforce the students when
they follow the directions. Typically,
teachers give directions to the students
and then focus attention only on those stu-
dents who do *not* obey. ("Bobby, you
didn't go back to your seat. Teddy, what's
wrong with you? Get back to work.") In-
stead, teachers should focus on those stu-
dents who do follow the directions, re-
phrasing the original directions as a posi-
tive comment. For example, "Jason went
back to his seat and got right to work."

Third, if a student is still misbehaving
after a teacher has taught specific direc-
tions and has used positive repetition,
only then should the teacher use the nega-
tive consequences outlined in his or her
Assertive Discipline plan. As a general
rule, a teacher shouldn't administer a dis-
ciplinary consequence to a student until
the teacher has reinforced at least two stu-
dents for the appropriate behavior. Ef-
fective teachers are always positive first.

Focusing on negative behavior teaches
students that negative behavior gets at-
tention, that the teacher is a negative per-
son, and that the classroom is a negative
place.

An effective behavior management pro-
gram must be built on choice. Students
must know beforehand what is expected
of them in the classroom, what will hap-
pen if they choose to behave, and what
will happen if they choose not to be-
have. Students learn self-discipline and
responsible behavior by being given clear,
consistent choices. They learn that their
actions have an impact and that they
themselves control the consequences.

I wish teachers did not need to use
negative consequences at all. I wish all
students came to school motivated to
learn. I wish all parents supported teach-
ers and administrators. But that's not the
reality today. Many children do not
come to school intrinsically motivated to
behave. Their parents have never taken
the time or don't have the knowledge or skills
to teach them how to behave. Given these
circumstances, teachers need to set firm
and consistent limits in their classrooms.
However, those limits must be fair, and
the consequences must be seen as out-
comes of behaviors that students have
chosen.

Students need teachers who can create
classroom environments in which teach-
ing and learning can take place. Every
student has the right to a learning en-
vironment that is free from disruption.
Students also need teachers who help
them learn how to behave appropriately
in school. Many students who are catego-
rized as behavior problems would not be
so labeled if their teachers had taught
them how to behave appropriately in the
classroom and had raised their self-
estee.

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WHY ASSERTIVE DISCIPLINE?

The average teacher never receives in-depth, competency-based training in managing the behavior of 30 students. No one teaches teachers how to keep students in their seats long enough for teachers to make good use of the skills they learned in their education classes. In most instances, behavior management is taught through a smorgasbord approach—a little bit of William Glasser, a little bit of Thomas Gordon, a little bit of Rudolf Dreikurs, a little bit of Lee Canter. The teachers are told to find an approach that works for them.

Such an approach to training teachers in behavior management is analogous to a swimming class in which nonswimmers are briefly introduced—without practice—to the crawl stroke, the breast stroke, the back stroke, and the side stroke; then they are rowed to the middle of a lake, tossed overboard, and told to swim to shore, using whatever stroke works for them. In effect, we're telling teachers to sink or swim, and too many teachers are sinking.

The lack of ability to manage student behavior is one of the key reasons why beginning teachers drop out of teaching. Teachers must be trained thoroughly in classroom management skills. It is not sufficient for them to know how to teach content. They will never get to the content unless they know how to create a positive environment in which students know how to behave.

Assertive Discipline is not a cure-all. It is a starting point. Every teacher should also know how to use counseling skills, how to use group process skills, and how to help students with behavioral deficits learn appropriate classroom behaviors. In addition, classroom management must be part of an educator's continuing professional development. Teachers routinely attend workshops, enroll in college courses, receive feedback from administrators, and take part in regular inservice training to refine their teaching skills. Classroom management skills deserve the same attention. Unfortunately, some educators view training in Assertive Discipline as a one-shot process; they attend a one-day workshop, and that's supposed to take care of their training needs for the rest of their careers.

One day is not enough. It takes a great deal of effort and continuing training for a teacher to master the skills of classroom management. A teacher also needs support from the building administrator. Without an administrator backing a teacher's efforts to improve behavior management, without an administrator to coach and clinically supervise a teacher's behavior management skills, that teacher is not going to receive the necessary feedback and assistance to master those skills.

Parental support for teachers' disciplinary efforts is equally important. Many teachers become frustrated and give up when they don't receive such support. We must train teachers to guarantee the support of parents by teaching teachers how to communicate effectively with parents. In teacher training programs, participants are led to believe that today's parents will act as parents did in the past and give absolute support to the school. That is rarely the case. Today's teachers call parents and are told, "He's your problem at school. You handle it. You're the professional. You take care of him. I don't know what to do. Leave me alone."

RESEARCH AND ASSERTIVE DISCIPLINE

Over the last several years, a number of dissertations, master's theses, and research projects have dealt with Assertive Discipline. The results have consistently shown that teachers dramatically improve student behavior when they use the skills as prescribed. Teachers who use Assertive Discipline reduce the frequency of disruptive behavior in their classrooms, greatly reduce the number of students they refer to administrators, and dramatically increase their students' time-on-task. 

Other research has demonstrated that student teachers trained in Assertive Discipline are evaluated by their master teachers as more effective in classroom management. Research conducted in school districts in California, Oregon, Ohio, and Arizona has shown that an overwhelming majority of teachers believe that Assertive Discipline helps to improve the climate in the schools and the behavior of students.

No one should be surprised that research has verified the success of the program when teachers use the skills properly. Numerous research studies have shown that teachers need to teach students the specific behaviors that they expect from them. Research also shows that student behavior improves when teachers use positive reinforcement effectively and that the pairing of positive reinforcement with consistent disciplinary consequences effectively motivates students to behave appropriately.

Another behavior management program that is taught to teachers today must have a solid foundation in research. Many so-called "experts" advocate programs that are based solely on their own opinions regarding what constitutes a proper classroom environment. When pressed, many of these experts have no research validating their opinions or perceptions, and many of their programs have never been validated for effectiveness in classrooms. We can't afford to train educators in programs based only on whim or untested theory. We have an obligation to insure that any training program in behavior management be based solidly on techniques that have been validated by research and that have been shown to work in the classroom.

Research has demonstrated that Assertive Discipline works and that it isn't just a quick-fix solution. In school districts in Lennox, California, and Troy, Ohio, teachers who were trained 10 years ago still use the program effectively. The program works because it is based on practices that effective teachers have followed instinctively for a long time. It's not new to have rules in a classroom. It's not new to use positive reinforcement. It's not new to have disciplinary consequences.

Teachers who are effective year after year take the basic Assertive Discipline competencies and mold them to their individual teaching styles. They may stop using certain techniques, such as putting marbles in a jar or writing names on the board. That's fine. I don't want the legacy of Assertive Discipline to be—and I don't want teachers to believe they have to use—names and checks on the board.
Save the Baby! A Response to 'Integrating the Children Of the Second System'

To throw out the baby (by dismantling special education) because the bath water is murky (there are still unresolved problems) would produce unintended results of disastrous proportions, these authors charge in their response to a November Kappan article.

BY GLENN A. VERGASON AND M. L. ANDEREGG

TO SAY THAT we are disturbed by the attack on special education that appeared in the November 1988 Kappan is an understatement.1 We do not understand why professionals in special education are attempting to make major changes in the professional practice of regular education. Moreover, we question why such well-known researchers as Margaret Wang, Maynard Reynolds, and Herbert Walberg are so dedicated to dismantling special education. The movement they champion has been given different names — the Regular Education Initiative, the Shared Responsibility Initiative, the General Education Initiative — but the underlying message is the same: a group of special educators knows what is best for all kinds of education.

We also question why professionals who are so well-known for their interest in research persist in pursuing a plan of attack based on research methodology that is so clearly flawed.2 While it is both healthy and helpful to raise questions about educational practices, these researchers have gone beyond the data to conduct a campaign to change special education in their own image. Their previous articles on this issue3 and their speeches have prompted one critic to describe their efforts as more a "public relations campaign" than a research effort.4 Others have characterized their solutions as "patent medicine."5

One of the premises in the Kappan article (and elsewhere in the writings of these three educators) is the idea that regular education and special education form separate systems. Our own experience and our discussions with teachers and administrators do not lead us to accept that notion. In fact, the very children that these writers hope to rescue from special education are, by and large, in regular education classes for most of the school day. Special education is an adaptive support system for the mildly handicapped; it is not a separate system.

Wang, Reynolds, and Walberg suggest that special education programs are usually "pall-out" programs and criticize