



Education

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Julia Steiny: Students should know the behavioral rules of the road

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, July 18, 2010



Years ago, a group of seventh-grade girls at Bishop Middle School befriended me and asked that I stay with them as a mentor when they moved to their new school. The Providence School Department mercifully decided to close that school, which was dreadful — it has since reopened as a lovely school.

But the following fall, when the girls and I resumed our weekly meetings at another school, they suddenly found themselves getting into trouble.

These were good girls. They cleaned house with their families on Saturdays, and most belonged to strong church communities. They had been receiving excellent grades at Bishop, though more as a reward for compliant behavior than for any real academic prowess.

But after only a few weeks in the new school, they'd been remanded to detention repeatedly, for the first time in their school careers. Just like that, they became some of the “bad” kids.

One explained to me, with huge tears welling up, that she'd been forced to tell her mother she was bad. Not only was her mother furious at her, but she'd been deeply humiliated by going to detention with “the really bad kids.” The offense? “Talking.” I'm sure teachers had gotten frustrated with their inattention. Bishop had been chaotically lax. By contrast, the new school prided itself on its incredibly rigid disciplinary code.

But no one had sat any of the new kids down to explain the rules and consequences. They were expected, somehow, to intuit a set of regulations that landed on them like a ton of bricks. So I went to work finding out the specifics of the school's discipline code — it was long, complicated and ardently punitive — while working with the girls to get them up to speed on how to get along in this kind of environment.

Top-down rules are very convenient, especially for the adults. But woe to good kids who start acting out or just

absent-mindedly screw up — maybe because they have problems at home, or suffer from a romance gone sour, or move to a new community.

Of course it's much easier for the adults just to hand down the rules than it is to develop agreements about behavior among adults and students alike. But that kind of process helps everyone in the community understand what it takes to learn well together. It's more work, in the short run, to build a school community that evolves, on an ongoing basis, ways to take care of one another and stay safe.

Punishment means hurting someone into compliance. Discipline means teaching them community-appropriate social skills.

By relying on punishment, America produces a hugely disproportionate share of the world's bad kids. With 5 percent of the world's population, we have nearly 25 percent of the world's prison population, according to the International Center for Prison Studies at King's College, London. (The U.S. has more prisoners by absolute numbers than any other country, including China, with four times the population. And in the early 2000s, we passed Russia as the country that incarcerates its own people at the highest rate per 1,000 inhabitants.) And our schools mirror our society.

Schools identify many soon-to-be-bad adults early on and train them into an antisocial mindset. From as early as preschool, where noncompliant kids are increasingly being kicked out, our schools depend heavily on sequestering those kids with "challenging behaviors" into segregated programs, out of sight and mind. Starting with therapeutic preschools, bad kids are segregated into "alternative" programs, schools and special classrooms for the "behavior-disordered," until they finally reach prison.

And frankly, many educators, parents and the public are begging for more such alternatives. Most of these programs, including the Training School (Rhode Island's prison for youthful offenders), use behavior-modification techniques of reward and punishment, according to a tight disciplinary program. And they're considered to "work well" in the sense that the child seems to get better while he or she is in the program.

But eventually these kids return to the community, the family and the schools that contributed to twisting them up in the first place. When they do, most of them revert to their old patterns of behaviors. And, of course, they would. Nothing has changed while they were gone. The community still has no clue how to deal with difficult kids, to get them into healthy relationships with the authorities and peers around them.

Statistically, a kid who gets suspended once will be suspended again. Detention leads to more detention; involvement with the police tends toward more involvement with the police. Noncompliance is met with punishment, but no research shows that punishment has positive long-term effects.

I strongly believe all kids need tons of discipline, far more than they're getting in today's culture. But, to me, this involves teaching them the social and emotional skills that will help them be successful in their community.

Sure enough, several of my girls eventually rebelled against the new school's strict regime, and began to hate school itself. Years later, several have joined communities of other disaffected youth. Who can blame them? At last, they're actually welcomed by someone in their community.

In the course of the next few weeks, this column is going to look at some of the best of these "bad kids" schools, and talk about the techniques their staff have collected over the years to build strong school communities. These are places where bad behavior is treated as an opportunity to work together on restoring social connection. I

believe these “restorative” practices should be incorporated into all our schools to TEACH discipline rather than just punishing noncompliance.

Meek obedience is convenient in the short run, but real community is far more valuable and sustaining for us all.

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