

Discipline by Design The Honor Level System

1. Proactive Discipline

How do you feel at the end of your teaching day?

Do you feel tired, but good? Do you feel like you have put in a good day's work and you're ready to go home, relax a bit and then tackle the chores that wait for you there?

Or do you feel worn out, worn down and exhausted? Do you feel like you have battled your way through the day, "putting out fires" as they erupted in your classroom? Did you look forward to the end of each class, hoping that the next group of youngsters who walked through the door would behave better? Do you have a stack of infraction slips that you just can't wait to turn into the office on your way out the door? Are you ready to get home so you can raid the fridge, find some chocolate, or alcohol because "you really need it?"

The difference in the way you answer these questions has a lot to do with whether or not you spent the day proactively, in control of when and how things happened in your classroom or reacting to one and then another and another situation as behavior problems interrupted your lessons again and again.

You can be sure that all of us have had both kinds of days. There are some teachers, however, who consistently experience the better days. These teachers have learned how to use proactive discipline to create a happy, healthy classroom setting. Their students feel comfortable and safe. Both the teacher and the students experience few surprises during the period. There are established routines for nearly every daily task.

The students know what they are expected to do when they come into class. Even though the period may vary from day to day, they know that it will always start the same way and that whatever the teacher has planned for this hour, he or she will lay it out for everyone at the beginning of class.

PRO-ACTION is about **being prepared** and **in control**. It's about knowing what is going to happen and when. In contrast, **REACTION** is about **doing "this", because some kid did "that!"** It's about dealing with problems as they come up. Soon you're finding that a second problem comes along while you're still dealing with the first.

Good preparation gives the teacher time to be proactive. This teacher doesn't have to scramble between classes setting up materials, printing copies in the office, and hurriedly writing instructions on the board. Instead, because she has handled these details earlier, she is standing outside her classroom, welcoming each of her students as they arrive at her door.

Every child hears her call him by his own name. Before class begins she has good idea who is sad or happy today. She knows who is angry and likely to vent that anger soon. She knows who

is going to need a little encouragement, who is going to need a little discouragement and who is going to need a lot of TLC.

The proactive teacher has planned her lessons so that she has a few minutes at the end of each period to get things ready for her next class before passing time. If necessary, she enlists the aid of youngsters in this class to help her set up for the next one. When the bell rings she is at the door again, reminding students about work that is due and sending them off to their next destination with a warm farewell before her next batch of students start to arrive.

Proactive classroom control begins with setting the tenor in your room in the first few minutes, before behaviors can become problems. If you miss the opportunity for a smooth, controlled start, you will spend more of your time trying to calm things down and regain control.

By following a routine that the students can count on, the proactive teacher heads off many discipline problems that the reactive teacher faces daily. Students arrive to class over the course of several minutes during passing time, but the children go right to work on a **daily start up activity** when they enter the room. The reactive teacher is trying to get attention when the bell rings. He starts the period by interrupting "free time."

When youngsters enter the proactive teacher's classroom they find their classmates already at work. As the reactive teacher's classroom fills up, students are talking, joking and waiting for class to start. Each period, each day the reactive teacher has to break their momentum, cut through the energy, and pull his students onto task. When the bell rings, the proactive teacher's class has been on task for some time, while her colleague is already in a reaction mode, trying to settle his students down.

While the youngsters work, the proactive teacher quietly takes roll, handles the start up chores of getting class going, and always announces her agenda for the period. Knowing this, the students are not excited by uncertainty and anticipation.

Her start up assignment provides practice in skills the students already know. It requires no instruction and very little explanation. Every student, regardless of ability, can complete the task in five to ten minutes. This routine has varied very little from the first days of the term when she took the time to walk them through the steps and practice her expectations. The children know where to find the assignment and what to do when they finish. Those who work quickly find time to talk quietly. Because the tone of the class has already been set, their voices are low and they rarely disrupt the others.

Across the hall, the reactive teacher has finally settled his class down. Less than five minutes into the period, he has already lost his temper. Now his students are waiting while he calls out roll. As he works his way down the list, casual talking begins. A student doesn't hear her name called because she is trying hard to go unnoticed as she continues a conversation the teacher "interrupted" when the bell rang. Again he has to react to misbehavior. His anxiety and frustration build. Class still hasn't started and he is reaching for the pad of infraction slips.

When problems do occur in the proactive teacher's room, she uses a series of **discipline steps**

designed to help the student change his behavior. In her classroom, a simple reminder is usually all that it takes. If that doesn't work, she hands an infraction slip to the student. She doesn't threaten to turn it into the office. Instead she says, "If you still have this at the end of the period you may throw it away."

She controls the situation by putting the student in control of the infraction slip. He doesn't have to see his name on the board. He doesn't have to wait to see if she is going to put a check after his name. This child doesn't worry about what the teacher is going to do next. He only has to worry about what he is going to do next.

At the beginning of the term the proactive teacher has carefully explained these steps. They are posted on the wall of her classroom. The student has just been given the opportunity to avoid a detention or some other consequence. The slip sits right on his desk as a reminder that if he stays on task, all will be fine. Usually no further intervention is required.

On those rare occasions, when a student continues to have difficulty making appropriate choices, the proactive teacher takes the slip back to be turned into the office. Even now she is still helping the student understand that he owns his own behavior. She is not giving him a detention; he has forced her to take the slip away. It is easier for him to see that this is not something that she is doing to him. Someday he may even realize it is something she has done for him. The final step in her discipline plan is to send the student to the office if the behavior doesn't change in the classroom. The proactive teacher may need to use this step only a few times a year with the more extreme cases.

In addition to posting these steps and going over them with each class, this proactive teacher has a short list classroom rules posted on the wall:

1. *Follow directions*
2. *Come to class prepared and on time*
3. *Leave gum, food and beverages in your locker*
4. *Keep your hands, feet and other objects away from others*

During class she may feel a need to remind a student by whispering, "Debbie, do you see this list on the wall? Look at number 1. Are you doing that right now? ... But you can, though, can't you?"

Her students rarely feel threatened by these reminders. This teacher has learned to spot problems even before the student knows he is headed that way.

The reactive teacher sends students to the office time and again. Usually this is the result of **confrontational escalation**. Too often we see a youngster sitting in the office, upset and confused. When asked what he did, he says, "I don't know."

Then after talking it through we find out at that something very minor progressed to a major problem in no time at all. The teacher asks a student to go pick up a crumpled paper that was thrown towards the wastebasket. Five seconds later they are arguing and the teacher reacts: "Get

yourself to the office, now!"

The teacher scolds Jimmy, "Stop talking, turn around and do your work." Jimmy tosses his head and snaps, "I wasn't talking!"

"Don't tell me you weren't talking!" Like a trap spring releasing, another minor offense has just escalated into a major discipline problem. Another student will soon be headed for the office.

The proactive teacher, on the other hand, focuses on the behavior she wants from the very beginning, without drawing attention to the misbehavior. "Jimmy, the rest of the class is working quietly now. You need to turn around and get going with your assignment, too."

There is not a lot there for Jimmy to challenge. He doesn't feel threatened or rebuffed. If he becomes a bit obstinate and attempts to argue, the proactive teacher sees where this is headed before he does. She calmly repeats what he says before telling him again what he needs to do.

It is very difficult to argue with someone who repeats everything you say. If Jimmy is getting upset and anxious, if his voice tenses up and gets louder, she repeats his own words slowly and calmly. Instead of taking the confrontation up a notch, she brings it back down.

A proactive teacher doesn't deliver ultimatums. During a classroom discussion, Mary is repeatedly turning around to speak with the students around her. "Mary, " her teacher directs, "I think it would be better if you come sit over here for the rest of the period."

Mary's face darkens and she folds her arms across her chest. "I don't want to sit over there!"

Calmly, but firmly, her teacher repeats Mary's challenge. "You don't want to sit over here. I can understand that. I know you would rather sit with your friends, but I think we can help you stay out of trouble if you move over here."

Mary becomes a little more anxious. She is reluctant to get up and move in front of her peers. "Why do I have to move?"

"Why do you have to move?" her teacher rephrases the question. "I have tried to give you the opportunity to make things work where you are sitting. You are leaving me with fewer and fewer choices. I would like you to come sit over here. Remember our first classroom rule, Mary. I expect you to follow directions."

Mary reluctantly makes her way across the room. "This isn't fair."

"I'm sorry you don't think this is fair. We can talk about this later when you're less upset. Thank you for moving now."

As always, the proactive teacher is hoping to see a change in behavior. She hopes that there is a way her student can stay in the classroom and not be sent somewhere else. Her principal knows that if and when she does send a student to the office, that she has really made an effort to make

things work in the classroom. He is quick to follow up on the problem and support the teacher.

Once a teacher gets caught in the reactive mode, classroom problems seem to multiply. The stress builds and his patience drops. Switching from a reactive mode to a proactive one is not easy, but it can be done. The first step can be as simple as greeting the students with a warm and friendly smile as they walk through the door.

2. Techniques that Backfire

If you haven't already been there, check out [Discipline Techniques](#) on this website. These 11 techniques for better discipline can be useful in managing a positive and comfortable classroom.

There are some techniques, however, that should be avoided. Linda Albert surveyed dozens of teachers, asking them what methods have backfired for them. Here they are as she has presented them in her book *A Teacher's Guide to Cooperative Discipline* (American Guidance Service, 1989).

After 30 years in elementary and middle school classrooms, I can honestly say I have tried most of these techniques. Linda is right. They may work a few times, but not over the long haul.

Techniques that backfire include:

- raising my voice
- yelling
- saying "I'm the boss here"
- insisting on having the last word
- using tense body language, such as rigid posture or clenched hands
- using degrading, insulting, humiliating, or embarrassing put-downs
- using sarcasm
- attacking the student's character
- acting superior
- using physical force
- drawing unrelated persons into the conflict
- having a double standard — making students do what I say, not what I do
- insisting that I am right
- preaching
- making assumptions
- backing the student into a corner
- pleading or bribing
- bringing up unrelated events
- generalizing about students by making remarks such as "All you kids are the same"
- making unsubstantiated accusations
- holding a grudge
- nagging
- throwing a temper tantrum
- mimicking the student
- making comparisons with siblings or other students
- commanding, demanding, dominating
- rewarding the student

3. 11 Techniques for Better Classroom Discipline

Here are eleven techniques that you can use in your classroom that will help you achieve effective group management and control. They have been adapted from an article called: "A Primer on Classroom Discipline: Principles Old and New" by Thomas R. McDaniel, *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1986.

1. Focusing

Be sure you have the attention of everyone in your classroom before you start your lesson. Don't attempt to teach over the chatter of students who are not paying attention.

Inexperienced teachers sometimes think that by beginning their lesson, the class will settle down. The children will see that things are underway now and it is time to go to work. Sometimes this works, but the children are also going to think that you are willing to compete with them, that you don't mind talking while they talk, or that you are willing to speak louder so that they can finish their conversation even after you have started the lesson. They get the idea that you accept their inattention and that it is permissible to talk while you are presenting a lesson. The focusing technique means that you will demand their attention before you begin. It means that you will wait and not start until everyone has settled down. Experienced teachers know that silence on their part is very effective. They will punctuate their waiting by extending it 3 to 5 seconds after the classroom is completely quiet. Then they begin their lesson using a quieter voice than normal.

A soft spoken teacher often has a calmer, quieter classroom than one with a stronger voice. Her students sit still in order to hear what she says.

2. Direct Instruction

Uncertainty increases the level of excitement in the classroom. The technique of direct instruction is to begin each class by telling the students exactly what will be happening. The teacher outlines what he and the students will be doing this period. He may set time limits for some tasks.

An effective way to marry this technique with the first one is to include time at the end of the period for students to do activities of their choosing. The teacher may finish the description of the hour's activities with: "And I think we will have some time at the end of the period for you to chat with your friends, go to the library, or catch up on work for other classes."

The teacher is more willing to wait for class attention when he knows there is extra time to meet his goals and objectives. The students soon realize that the more time the teacher waits for their attention, the less free time they have at the end of the hour.

3. Monitoring

The key to this principle is to circulate. Get up and get around the room. While your students are working, make the rounds. Check on their progress.

An effective teacher will make a pass through the whole room about two minutes after the students have started a written assignment. She checks that each student has started, that the children are on the correct page, and that everyone has put their names on their papers. The delay is important. She wants her students to have a problem or two finished so she can check that answers are correctly labeled or in complete sentences. She provides individualized instruction as needed.

Students who are not yet quite on task will be quick to get going as they see her approach. Those that were distracted or slow to get started can be nudged along.

The teacher does not interrupt the class or try to make general announcements unless she notices that several students have difficulty with the same thing. The teacher uses a quiet voice and her students appreciate her personal and positive attention.

4. Modeling

McDaniel tells us of a saying that goes "Values are caught, not taught." Teachers who are courteous, prompt, enthusiastic, in control, patient and organized provide examples for their students through their own behavior. The "do as I say, not as I do" teachers send mixed messages that confuse students and invite misbehavior.

If you want students to use quiet voices in your classroom while they work, you too will use a quiet voice as you move through the room helping youngsters.

5. Non-Verbal Cueing

A standard item in the classroom of the 1950's was the clerk's bell. A shiny nickel bell sat on the teacher's desk. With one tap of the button on top he had everyone's attention. Teachers have shown a lot of ingenuity over the years in making use of non-verbal cues in the classroom. Some flip light switches. Others keep clickers in their pockets.

Non-verbal cues can also be facial expressions, body posture and hand signals. Care should be given in choosing the types of cues you use in your classroom. Take time to explain what you want the students to do when you use your cues.

6. Environmental Control

A classroom can be a warm cheery place. Students enjoy an environment that changes periodically. Study centers with pictures and color invite enthusiasm for your subject.

Young people like to know about you and your interests. Include personal items in your classroom. A family picture or a few items from a hobby or collection on your desk will trigger personal conversations with your students. As they get to know you better, you will see fewer problems with discipline.

Just as you may want to enrich your classroom, there are times when you may want to impoverish it as well. You may need a quiet corner with few distractions. Some students will get caught up in visual exploration. For them, the splash and the color is a siren that pulls them off task. They may need more “vanilla” and less “rocky-road.” Have a quiet place where you can steer these youngsters. Let them get their work done first and then come back to explore and enjoy the rest of the room.

7. Low-Profile Intervention

Most students are sent to the principal’s office as a result of confrontational escalation. The teacher has called them on a lesser offense, but in the moments that follow, the student and the teacher are swept up in a verbal maelstrom. Much of this can be avoided when the teacher’s intervention is quiet and calm.

An effective teacher will take care that the student is not rewarded for misbehavior by becoming the focus of attention. She monitors the activity in her classroom, moving around the room. She anticipates problems before they occur. Her approach to a misbehaving student is inconspicuous. Others in the class are not distracted.

While lecturing to her class this teacher makes effective use of name-dropping. If she sees a student talking or off task, she simply drops the youngster’s name into her dialogue in a natural way. “And you see, David, we carry the one to the tens column.” David hears his name and is drawn back on task. The rest of the class doesn’t seem to notice.

8. Assertive Discipline

This is traditional limit setting authoritarianism. When executed as presented by Lee Canter (who has made this form a discipline one of the most widely known and practiced) it will include a good mix of praise. This is high profile discipline. The teacher is the boss and no child has the right to interfere with the learning of any student. Clear rules are laid out and consistently enforced.

9. Assertive I-Messages

A component of Assertive Discipline, these I-Messages are statements that the teacher uses when confronting a student who is misbehaving. They are intended to be clear descriptions of what the

student is suppose to do. The teacher who makes good use of this technique will focus the child’s attention first and foremost on the behavior he wants, not on the misbehavior. “I want you to...” or “I need you to...” or “I expect you to...”

The inexperienced teacher may incorrectly try “I want you to stop...” only to discover that this usually triggers confrontation and denial. The focus is on the misbehavior and the student is quick to retort: “I wasn’t doing anything!” or “It wasn’t my fault...” or “Since when is there a rule against...” and escalation has begun.

10. Humanistic I-Messages

These I-messages are expressions of our feelings. Thomas Gordon, creator of Teacher Effectiveness Training (TET), tells us to structure these messages in three parts. First, include a description of the child’s behavior. “When you talk while I talk...” Second, relate the effect this behavior has on the teacher. “...I have to stop my teaching...” And third, let the student know the feeling that it generates in the teacher. “... which frustrates me.”

A teacher, distracted by a student who was constantly talking while he tried to teach, once made this powerful expression of feelings: “I cannot imagine what I have done to you that I do not deserve the respect from you that I get from the others in this class. If I have been rude to you or inconsiderate in any way, please let me know. I feel as though I have somehow offended you and now you are unwilling to show me respect.” The student did not talk during his lectures again for many weeks.

11. Positive Discipline

Use classroom rules that describe the behaviors you want instead of listing things the students cannot do. Instead of “no-running in the room,” use “move through the building in an orderly manner.” Instead of “no fighting,” use “settle conflicts appropriately.” Instead of “no gum chewing,” use “leave gum at home.” Refer to your rules as expectations. Let your students know this is how you expect them to behave in your classroom.

Make ample use of praise. When you see good behavior, acknowledge it. This can be done verbally, of course, but it doesn’t have to be. A nod, a smile or a “thumbs up” will reinforce the behavior.

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