

Teacher Mindset and Skills

I really do love these kids, and they sense that. I establish consistent routines. When I say something, that's the way it's going to be. I'm quiet about it, but I'm firm. Once we talk about the guidelines and they understand them, then every single time someone deviates, I have them Take a Break or another consequence we've talked about. This relies on my "noticing," because a lot of times I can correct a few papers and still notice everything. The kids know that, and it helps them feel safe; they know that I'm going to see them and they're going to have to sit out or do something to fix their mistakes. I think it relies on relationship, too, because they know I like them and have their best interests at heart. So they're willing to trust me. I think what works is that I take action every single time they step away from the rules. I'm never too tired or too distracted to do what I know I need to do.

—8th grade language arts teacher, Greenfield MA

What is at work when teachers remain steady and committed to a student's growth in the face of anger and rule-breaking? How does a teacher devise a consistent, dignified, effective response through the daily trials of a middle school classroom? There are no formulas, but we do know that successful educators call on inner strengths, moment by moment, in the classroom. We are interested in naming and exploring some of those strengths, because they are essential for meeting the needs of adolescents in an academic setting. We're going to begin with them, because the right disciplinary action taken without the right skills and the right mental/emotional package is not likely to succeed.

Facing the truth about what it takes to teach discipline effectively is dangerous—we risk scaring ourselves away from the task—but not seeing what is at work is even more dangerous. When discipline structures fail, what often happens is that we look at the action only, failing to examine the skills and mood with which we took the disciplinary action, and we say that the action didn't work, without understanding why. But it is the full picture of the steps we take, the skill with which we take them, and the attitude with which we flavor them that makes or breaks the corrective action.

Lest we give up on the structure and continue to struggle over discipline in partial darkness, in this chapter we will look at the frames of mind and skills necessary to succeed in behavior management, examine why they are important, and consider how they might be cultivated.

TEACHER MINDSET

What mental and emotional strengths does a teacher draw on to meet the considerable challenges of behavior management? Educational coaches and consultants working to support *Developmental Designs* implementation in classrooms across the U.S. have noted that successful teacher disciplinarians work from three fundamental frames of mind:

Growth mindset: The space of possibility that we hold for each student—our belief in their capacity for growth into responsible independence—as we guide them

Action Mindset: The active support of each student through good times and bad, which demands a commitment of heart and mind fueled by courage and a sense of urgency

Objective Mindset: The ability to interact with students without taking what they do and say personally

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or for worse. (Palmer 1998, 2)

Growth Mindset

Everyone can grow. This simple but crucial idea builds power when applied to teaching:

- Every student has the capacity to grow and ultimately succeed
- Self-control and resilience are teachable and learnable (some students need more guidance than others)
- Given the plasticity of the brain, we can grow new and positive habits
- Effort, not talent, is the best path to mastery
- Teachers have the capacity to grow their skills so that all students' needs are addressed
- Challenges, setbacks, and criticism are welcome, because they provide a context for growth

Teaching in accordance with these understandings requires some conscious commitments: a declaration to keep on patiently trying in the face of pushback when solutions are not apparent, and a determination to build a pathway to success for even those students whose capacity is hard to see at times. The payoff is results in place of reasons why not.

Growth-minded students

Teaching is most successful when the teacher believes in the capacity of all people to grow, and when the teacher cultivates in the students a belief in their own growth. In other words, we must teach a growth mindset, model it as believers in our own growth, and “hold the space” for students who do not yet believe in themselves.

Consider the dangers of “fixed-mindset” thinking for adolescents: A physically awkward boy in his early teens had had several negative experiences on the playground;

he lacked stamina, had poor hand-eye coordination, and bumped into others. He decided he was a klutz (a fixed mindset), and did not embrace physical activity. The ungainly teen soon reached his full height and became more coordinated. He might have discovered a love of Ultimate Frisbee or soccer and gone on to spend several decades engaged in regular, healthy physical activity and the social satisfaction gained by being part of a team, had he kept a growth mindset, but because he had settled into a mindset that labeled his athletic skills deficient, he lost out.

Interestingly, the fixed mindset is just as dangerous when initially positive: An eighth grader did well in math and decided she was a “math whiz” (a fixed mindset) until she confronted algebra. Faced with a math struggle for the first time in her life, she quickly felt incompetent, and swung to a new summary judgment: math wasn’t really for her after all. Chances are she simply wasn’t developmentally ready to handle the abstract thinking required to integrate the algebraic mode, but by labeling herself first a “winner” then a “loser” in math, she closed the door on many career possibilities.

The impact of growth and fixed mindsets was the focus of a study of low-achieving seventh graders in New York City. All students in the study group began by attending sessions during which they learned study skills, how the brain works, and other achievement-related topics. The control group attended an informational session on memory (fixed-mindset ideas), while a second group learned that intelligence, like a muscle, grows stronger through exercise (growth-mindset ideas). The group that received the growth-mindset messages greatly improved in the areas of motivation and math grades; students in the control group showed no improvement despite the other interventions. (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck 2007)

This research illustrates the importance of having conversations with all students about how intelligence grows—through exercise and effort. The pages that follow offer ways to talk with students about the importance of social skills and how they develop. The conversations take on life as social skills are taught and practiced. Mistakes are opportunities to fix things and try again. Through encouragement and reflection, students experience their own growth.

When students believe they can develop their intelligence, they focus on doing just that. Not worrying about how smart they will appear, they take on challenges and stick to them. (Dweck 2007, 35)

Numerous studies have found that students who adopt task-focused (mastery) goals are more likely to engage in deep cognitive processing, such as thinking about how newly learned material relates to previous knowledge and attempting to understand complex relationships. In contrast, students who adopt ability-focused (performance) goals tend to use surface-level strategies such as the rote memorization of facts and immediately asking the teacher for assistance when confronted with difficult academic tasks. (Anderman and Maehr 1994, 295)

Growth-minded teachers

I really disliked the raised hand as a signal for silence. The sight of a teacher with her hand raised, and all the students raising theirs in response, reminded me of a Nazi salute—rigid and slavish. And insisting that no one could speak while the one person was speaking, refusing to allow side conversations or just speaking out, seemed suppressive. I was proud that mine was an “open” classroom, and we had exciting conversations about things that really mattered to me and to the

students. I was proud of that until a colleague asked me about the students who sat silently through most discussions. “Maybe,” he said, “they feel that there’s no room for them to squeeze into the conversation.” I suddenly saw what he saw, and knew I had to change. I began using the signal and raised hands for permission to speak, and our conversations, although somewhat less dynamic and fast-moving, became thoughtful explorations, with all voices heard.

—Principal and former K-12 teacher, MN

Being growth-oriented in teaching means having the humility to acknowledge the gaps: *I don’t know everything—there’s still a lot for me to learn, and I can and will grow.* Such a stance keeps our minds open to learning from colleagues, workshops, books, and from students themselves: *I don’t know everything, so I am willing to hone my teaching skills and learn from you and about you.* This open-minded receptivity infuses optimism into frustrating, potentially defeating moments: *I know this student can grow. What does he need from me to make this happen, and what do I need to learn about him?*

Knowing that we don’t know everything gives tooth to strategic sharing of power with students. Reluctance to take chances gives way to growing awareness of what strengths are dawning in students that can be parlayed into independence and power, and what strengths are growing in ourselves to guide them there. It’s like having a third eye—to see what isn’t there yet in our students and in ourselves. An apt adjustment of the old adage would be: *I’ll see it when I believe it.*

When we walk the subtle line between the authority we are obliged to exercise and the humility to remain open to learning from our students, we demonstrate great personal power. What a balancing act—taking charge while holding the thought that you don’t know everything! Neither selfless nor powerless, this kind of humility is an act of strength and commitment in the service of our students.

Psychologist Carol Dweck responds to the question, how can growth-minded teachers consistently devote their energies and untold hours to even the most challenging students? “The answer is that they’re not entirely selfless. They love to learn. And teaching is a wonderful way to learn. About people and how they tick. About what you teach. About yourself. And about life.” (Dweck 2007, 201)

Teacher self-assessment

Admitting we don’t know guides us to seek change in our teaching. It helps us identify our growing edges: *What works for most students doesn’t work for this student. Is there something else I could try? Am I truly being consistent? Is there some important adjustment needed in my approach?*

When we recognize our capacity for growth and that our students and others contribute to our teaching, we look for ways to identify what and how we need to learn. One easy place to look is in the mirror. Periodically evaluating our teaching strengths leverages our professional growth, just as reflecting on the behavior of our students helps us help them. We can check ourselves against inventories that describe qualities such as:

I know how to teach content in ways that maximize student learning

I intervene when I see unacceptable behaviors

We can answer reflection questions in a journal, such as:

Did I increase student participation in fifth hour today?

Am I catching small misbehaviors before they escalate?

Or we can simply write in an unstructured way thoughts about what we did and how we did it during the day. Sticky notes stuck on a lesson plan or daily calendar can remind us to think about doing things differently next time. We can use a standard set of basic questions to review in our minds any lesson we've taught: *What did I teach? Now what? So what?* They help us think about how we did something, what would be a good follow-up to reinforce or extend the learning, and maybe most important, what was the purpose or meaning for my students in learning this knowledge or skill? The questions could be designed around behavior management or teacher language: *Which students were disciplined today? What follow-ups do I need to do? Did I avoid using sarcasm? Did I use open-ended questions to get students to think about their behavior?* For more on self-assessment through inventories and written reflection, see pages 232-239.

Colleagues can be another avenue for self-assessment and reflection. Even brief conversations, so long as they are specific and honest enough to be useful, can get us thinking harder or from a different angle. In some teaching cultures, observing and processing lessons together is built into the teaching day. Most American schools do not have that benefit, but we can find ways to process with each other, formally in staff meetings and staff development opportunities, and informally over coffee.

Action Mindset

Brittany was one of my students who spoke her mind, and usually as soon as the thought was born. Often her contributions were biting. In our first social conference she was polite until we had to identify what behavior in the Social Contract she was not living up to. She immediately went on the defensive and acted as if she were trapped in a corner. She admitted to disrespect, but the rest of the conversation was a struggle. She had several criticisms of others, including me. She was very bitter.

We agreed on a signal I would give her as an early warning when she was getting disrespectful in class, and we agreed to meet again in two weeks. The signal didn't really work because she was only slightly committed to changing. Next time we met, we changed the signal, but her disrespectful comments continued.

I stayed with my commitment to her growth. I did a little research, and learned that she slept on a couch at her grandma's house with her mom, grandma, and an aunt and uncle. As I grew to understand her, I could better see through her roughness. This helped me have the resiliency to keep coming back and checking with her.

I searched for her strengths, as she did her best to hide them, and I discovered what a talented writer she was. In one of our conferences when I shared this recognition with her, she acted as though no one had ever told her this before. My resolve thereafter was to find and draw out the talents and good in her. Our conversations never really became warm, but these recognitions seemed to help take some of the edge off. At one point Brittany was acknowledged by a fellow classmate for showing respect. She beamed a bit, and seemed to enjoy the moment.

—Middle level teacher, LaCrosse WI

Courage and commitment in teaching

Who's responsible for our students' education? They are. Their parents are. We are. The paradox is that all of us also have *all* of the responsibility. As teachers we have to consistently act on our responsibility to create openings for students to take responsibility for their part. In certain cases, this may not be easy. The data tell us that not all students succeed, but nevertheless, each year our active commitment to their growth will be a decisive factor in their lives. And it is not enough to merely *believe* that we are responsible. Commitment calls for us to *actively provide* the relationship and assistance needed for every student to move along his/her journey of growth, even if it means going outside our individual comfort zone. There are no throwaways, although some students may need a special environment that we cannot provide. Even so, it's our job to know what is needed, and to take action.

Acting on a commitment to teach each student effective *self-discipline* requires sufficient, steady strength and stamina. Moving students in the right direction is sometimes an act of will, requiring us to tap into our personal reservoir of courage. It takes courage:

- to hold the line for a classroom of adolescents, many of whom are sure to test your limits
- to be equitable
- to consistently intervene when students break the rules
- to maintain professionalism in the face of high emotions—theirs and yours
- to exude calm, thoughtful confidence
- to keep parents in the loop
- to maintain your belief in all students' ability to grow
- to try things you believe are good for students but are outside your comfort zone
- to work on your professional weak spots
- to admit mistakes, fix them, and move on
- to slow down and get things right rather than rush ahead and have to pick up the pieces later

It also takes great diligence to give attention to many details, and never just let things go. The switch is on from the moment you come into the building to the moment you leave.

For many teachers, the problem isn't that they lack *courage per se*, but that they have a specific fear that prevents them from trying something new, and the fear paralyzes them. For example, a teacher who considers himself a weak disciplinarian may fear conflict, and will resist using a redirect that requires a student to move. He doesn't know how the student will react, and if the student refuses, the teacher has a power struggle on his hands.

When we operate out of fearful reluctance, we are, in effect, trying to teach discipline with one arm tied behind our back, and we are stuck with what remains: repeated verbal reminders, pleading, cajoling, lecturing, using sarcasm, etc.—redirects that don't require the rule-breakers to do anything but listen (or at least be silent and act like they are listening) and are therefore responses to misbehavior that are too “soft” to make a difference. When our exasperation or anger takes over, we end up sending the student to the office, a strategy that might have been avoided had we used a stronger, more courageous intervention earlier.

How does one get over that type of fear that leads to paralysis? There is no formula, but when discussing the issue of courage as it relates to teaching discipline, Kristen Konop, middle school teacher at Crosswinds East Metro Arts and Science School in St. Paul, MN, says, “Sometimes you just have to jump off a cliff. Nine times out of ten, you realize you always had it in you.”

Each time I walk into a classroom, I can choose the place within myself from which my teaching will come, just as I can choose the place within my students toward which my teaching will be aimed. I need not teach from a fearful place: I can teach from curiosity or hope or empathy or honesty, places that are as real within me as are my fears. I can have fear, but I need not be fear—if I am willing to stand someplace else in my inner landscape. (Palmer 1998, 57)

Students who present the most challenging behaviors try my patience and wear me out. It sometimes takes all my energy and courage to keep coming back to check in, especially when they intentionally *choose* not to cooperate.

Forrest was an emotionally-challenged student who lost no opportunity to disrupt the class during the first week of school. When we put together a “gift puzzle” of what we each brought to the community/class, his gift was “hatred.” He offered it in front of the whole class. He seemed so angry! I was a little afraid to take him on, but I did.

In a brief conference immediately following class, I asked him if he realized that his behavior was out of line. He admitted to being disrespectful. I asked him how he was going to improve. He stated that he was not going to improve. I asked him a second time, and again he said he was not going to improve. I took a deep breath, and said that if that indeed was his choice, then in effect he was surrendering his freedom to choose. I would be taking over control. I told him he was going to go back to his seat and compose an appropriate gift. He asked me, “When?” I said, “Right now.” He replied, “Oh!” with a look of surprise. I said, “What will you do if you don't have a pencil?” He said he did not have one. I reminded him of our procedure for classroom pens and pencils. He responded, “Okay,” and walked into the room, picked up a pencil, walked to his seat, and got to work. We had one more outburst a few days later, when he was having an especially bad day, and I reminded him about the Take a Break chair.

One of the reasons I believe the quick exchange with Forrest worked was that I set clear boundaries. He knew where they were, could more easily follow them, and knew that I would keep up with them. That gave him the sense of security and safety that allowed him to be a bit more relaxed and not so anxious, and he functioned more appropriately. I drew a line and let him know not to step over it, for his own good.

—Middle level teacher, LaCrosse WI

Urgency in teaching

Whether released or restrained by fear, feeling courageous or doubtful and tired, we must act decisively for the good of our students. Some call this quality of action “moral

agency,” the forwarding of others according to our highest moral commitments. One *Developmental Designs* practitioner describes this force within as “urgency”: “I have no choice, really. I must do what I can, right now, to get this child straightened out and flying right.”

A sense of urgency can lead to quick social conferences with students, well-timed conversations to convey the social-skill knowledge they need.

Derek was my little comedian. He joked around all the time, not understanding when it was OK and when it was not. We had conversations about when humor gets in the way of instruction. I said, “You must channel that powerful skill appropriately. You must learn to manage it.” After that, when he began to joke at inappropriate times, I would simply say, “Not now.” He learned to stop, and the interruptions decreased. What could be seen as sabotage was better viewed as an enthusiastic young person with little self-control, and an itch for attention. By withholding negative judgment of Derek, I was able to teach him internalized self-control early on while maintaining, even reinforcing, our good relationship. I felt a great sense of urgency to act now, on his behalf, so I thought hard and worked with him to redirect his joking behavior. Derek needed me. I could help. The way I see it is that students are learning all the time, for better or worse, and my sense of how urgently important it is for them to grow pushes me to act to keep their learning positive and within my design.

—5th grade teacher, St. Paul MN

A sense of urgency can call for both patience and impatience in teaching. Impatience is called for in the face of anything that stands between our students and their optimal learning—including student misbehavior, staff dysfunction, preconceived beliefs of others (or your own) about what individual students or groups of students are capable of, district policy blunders, physical plant issues, etc. The urgent stand is: We must put everything we’ve got into teaching our students, and we don’t have time to waste.

Patience may seem an unlikely partner to urgency. Can someone be urgently patient? Yes, when we take time to teach, model, practice, set rules, create norms together, seek student endorsement through sharing personal experiences, ask open-ended questions, and work with students who need extra time to develop appropriate behavior. Change is hard—it can be slow, incremental, with false starts, peaks and valleys—and internalized social skills are usually hard-wrought. They are developed with patient, committed teaching and a willingness to share power for long-term payoffs.

Objective Mindset

Professional objectivity is part of the full complement of teacher equipment when we move from thinking of ourselves as mere disciplinarians to teachers of self-discipline. It’s not about us holding the power to punish (although we do have this power); it is more about empowering our students to learn to discipline themselves. In fact, when things are working the way we really want them to, it’s not about us at all.

Researcher Robert Marzano defines emotional objectivity as part of the necessary mindset of effective disciplinarians: “[A]n effective classroom manager implements and enforces rules and procedures, executes disciplinary actions, and cultivates effective relationships with students without interpreting violations of classroom rules and procedures, negative reactions to disciplinary actions, or lack of response to teacher’s

attempts to forge relationships as a personal attack.” (Marzano 2003, 68)

Marzano tracked the impact of holding a professional distance in the heat of the moment in his meta-analysis and found that it added an additional 26% effectiveness in reducing behavior disruptions. He recognizes, “This is very difficult to do because the normal human reaction to student disobedience or lack of response is to feel hurt or even angry.” (Marzano 2003, 67-69)

On the other hand, Max van Manen in *The Tone of Teaching* reminds us that although we try to see students objectively, since neither they nor we are objects, in the name of objectivity we may default to summative labeling and automatic interventions, as if they were.

What happens then is that I forego the possibility of truly listening to and seeing the specific child. (van Manen 2003, 26)

When we lose sight of the individual child, our chances of making a difference in his life, especially when the child has many social deficits, are greatly reduced. It is by connecting to the individual that we can figure out what best to say and do, what best to have the student do, given his needs, his current skills, and his style of being. But it is by remaining enough apart that we can look clearly at the student without the fog of hurt or anger. It’s definitely a balancing act, and the proportions of personal interest and objectivity that work for one may not work for another. Discipline is a process of careful decision-making and planning. We must:

- Offer clear choices when students cross the line, and communicate those choices firmly but without malice. “It’s my way or the highway!” isn’t a choice.
- Listen to students who are having difficulties, even if some of what they say may be directed at us. When students ask: “Why should I?” it takes humility to step away from the stock reply “because I said so,” or to not run away, and to craft a thought-provoking answer that brings the students on board.



Student and teacher share a moment of connection with a playful greeting

- Not take it personally—so easy to say! Only a clear mind and a powerful intention can help us pull it off.

“The teacher,” says van Manen, “serves the child by observing from very close proximity while still maintaining distance.” (van Manen 2003, 28)

A teacher colleague of mine had had a tough time with a student, and when she and I had to conference with him and his parent, she was afraid. The whole thing had become a personality battle. She had become too emotionally involved. The student was wrong in the first place, but it was the teacher’s emotion that brought her down to his level in the matter. The student had had similar problems in 7th grade, and now in 9th those same behaviors were resurfacing. I showed him in the conference that there were times when he crossed the line and asked did he remember how to stop short of that the way he did in 7th grade. That helped him. The teacher got a chance to see where things tended to go wrong for her as a pattern when she interacted with students. She attributed too much meaning to everything, gave it a personal value, and then lost her own controls. When that happens, when you snap out with a student, he or she will run with it. You’ve got to keep from getting caught up, keep your power by keeping your cool.

—9th grade assistant principal, Harrisburg PA

TEACHER SKILLSET

The list of skills important to good discipline is sobering, because it is so long. Nobody ever perfects all of the skills; we all have partial skill sets. Like a good craftsperson, we shape and polish the skills we have and work to develop more along the way.

Knowing Your Students Developmentally

Honing and keeping our knowledge of adolescent developmental needs front and center influences the effectiveness of every move we make in behavior management. Developmental science tells us that adolescents are chemically prone to certain behaviors, almost promising struggles and strengths in predictable areas. Adolescent brains are especially active in the area of sensation and risk-seeking, and not as developed in the areas necessary for exercising judgment. Especially in early adolescence, there's a dangerous gap between the urge to take risks and the internal brakes that suggest the need to think first. Impetuosity and poor judgment are responsible for much of the rule-breaking in middle schools.

[A] large and compelling body of scientific research on the neurological development of teens confirms a long-held, common sense view: teenagers are not the same as adults in a variety of key areas such as the ability to make sound judgments when confronted by complex situations, the capacity to control impulses, and the ability to plan effectively. Such limitations reflect, in part, the fact that key areas of the adolescent brain, especially the prefrontal cortex that controls many high order skills, are not fully mature until the third decade of life. (Weinberger et al. 2005, 3)

Acknowledging the force of developmental patterns and needs can defuse and de-personalize behavior confrontations and help us to view these potentially high-emotion exchanges as not about us, not unique to our relationship, and often, quite ordinary. The knowledge we have about the biology of young adolescents allows us to remain focused on our commitments and to maintain the objectivity required for effectively sharing power.

Once we focus on the four basic human needs identified by theorists —autonomy, relationship, competence, and fun—and understand that humans will do almost anything to get their needs met, we can simply *assume* the necessity of addressing them. The needs take on special force in adolescence, that threshold to adulthood, where autonomy seems just beyond our grasp, competence ever elusive, and relationships a matter of survival. Even the quest for fun presents a challenge, because it lures us to take big risks in our love affair with excitement and stimulation. So how do we use discipline to help our students meet their needs in a safe, productive way? The behavior management structures in this book incorporate knowledge of adolescent developmental needs, with indications for the reader of what forces are at work and how they are being responsibly satisfied. See pages 113-117 and Appendix A for more about adolescent development.

Dr. James P. Comer of the Yale Child Study Center Project proposes that “many practices in education that have been developed over the past two decades have been less successful than they might have been because they have focused primarily on curriculum, instruction, assessment,

and modes of service delivery,” neglecting the principles of child and adolescent development. (Comer 2005, 758)

Building Positive Relationships With and Among Students

Positive, inclusive, trusting relationships underlie successful behavior management. All relationships—between teachers and their students, among students, among adults, and our relationships with ourselves—color every move we make to discipline students. From the first moment you enter school each year through every moment of every class hour, tending to relationships is paramount. A huge help in this everlasting responsibility is using structures to shape life in school. This book offers ways to build community and get to know one another during advisory and class hours (pages 48-50) and careful consideration for building, maintaining, and strengthening teacher-student relationships with every rule-breaking redirection and intervention. The latter is done through structures that allow dignity and provide appropriate autonomy for the student, embodied in rigorous attention to respectful teacher language.

[In academic performance and in the area of health behaviors], young people who feel connected to school, that they belong, and that teachers are supportive and treat them fairly, do better. Some contend the business of school is teaching for knowledge acquisition and that attention to the non-academic aspects of school is a low priority. However, the health and education literature suggests these factors contribute significantly to school success. (Libbey 2004, 282)

In addition to ways that strong relationships between teachers and students allow for mentorship in social skills, positive peer-to-peer relationships also boost social and academic learning. Observing friends who know how to get along in school is the best way to learn and reinforce the skills necessary for smooth social interaction. Our students have their eyes and ears on us, but even more on each other. The community-building strategies described in this book are designed to provide the best environment possible for peer learning.

It is in peer relationships that [young people] broaden self-knowledge of their capabilities. Peers serve several important efficacy functions. Those who are most experienced and competent provide models of efficacious styles of thinking and behavior. A vast amount of social learning occurs among peers. (Bandura 1994, 78)

Using Encouraging and Respectful Teacher Language

One way we can create a friendly environment for learning together is to insert some fun or movement or personal interest into our teaching. But we also have a tool ready at every moment to make or break our relationships with students: our language. In every encounter, the tone of our voices, body language, and words can build connection or dismantle it, can help or hinder the process of students becoming responsibly independent. When responding to student mistakes, if our words are rooted in our belief that students want to and can do well in school, if we avoid rescuing them or debilitating them with praise, and invite them to solve problems and make choices, we can build social skills as we correct mistakes. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky, in his

theory of language development, established an explicit connection between speech and cognitive development. The language we use with students shapes how they feel and think; it forms their behavior. (Vygotsky 1986/1934)

[L]anguage has “content,” but it also bears information about the speaker and how he or she views the listener and their assumed relationship. (Johnston 2004, 6)

We need to maintain a tone of acceptance and encouragement that empowers young adolescents when we see positive actions *and* when we are correcting negative ones.

Armand, what do you need to get started? Alisha, the timer is on—where should you be?

Effective use of teacher language is like a steady infusion of caring support. It nudges students toward right action while maintaining a good relationship with them. It is most effective when we are specific, direct, and clear. Using language that invites reflection after rule-breaking maintains everyone’s dignity, shows a relentless faith in each student’s ability to learn, and is evidence of a shared-power relationship between a caring guide and a student moving gradually towards responsible independence. The subtext of every exchange is: *I am asking this student to think about what he just did so he can identify what he learned or needs to learn, and leverage the growth I know he is capable of.*

The teacher escorting students towards self-management avoids language that creates dependency through praise or punishment. We must avoid the temptation to give young adolescents broad strokes, when what they often need is specific information about what was effective in what they did, or help in perceiving their strengths on their own.

We must avoid purposely injecting pain into a correction in the mistaken belief that without it there will be no gain. To develop positive behaviors, students need guidance in the context of encouragement. We have to treat them well for them to behave well. What we’re after, always, is to help students develop *internalized* good judgment through on-the-spot critical feedback that is firm, clear, and encouraging, all at the same time. Examples of encouraging and respectful teacher language are included in the discussion of every structure introduced in this book.

Students pick up where we are from our tone, our attitude. You don’t have to praise them. The way I see it is there aren’t “good” things and “bad” things that they do—there are just things. *We* put the value on it. I avoid putting value on student behavior. I think of the student and the role each needs to play. I acknowledge when they’ve got their role in action and when they haven’t. I use no praise. I avoid value language across the board so no one sees me as playing favorites or being prejudiced against someone.

—Middle level teacher, Harrisburg PA

Cultivating Endorsement to Increase Student Motivation

There is wide agreement that self-motivated people have an advantage over those who need external motivators to get them to act. *Jazz Theory* author Mark Levine claims that music students need four things to become skillful practitioners of their craft: talent,

good teachers, access to quality musical examples, and ambition. Of the four, he says ambition is by far the most important ingredient.

The million-dollar question for educators is: How does motivation work? In any class, some students will be self-motivated while others won't, so how can I motivate students to engage in the behaviors that support learning subject-area content and a healthy community: listening, putting forth effort, handing in work on time, participating actively, and following the rules?

Motivation has been studied for decades. According to psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, the best way to motivate someone else is to get him to *endorse* a rationale for engaging in the target behavior. When this occurs—and with plenty of practice over time—the desired behavior can become a part of who that person is. The result: the level of student motivation to engage in the target behavior becomes almost the same as it would be for something he was intrinsically motivated to do. (Deci and Flaste, 1995) For more details on Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory, see pages 254-255.

Creating endorsement for behavior-management practices

Throughout the school year, the approach we present here creates endorsement for behavior-management practices both before and after rules are broken. If we can make the case that getting good at setting goals, creating rules, doing routines a certain way, and so on, are really useful to them, we stand a good chance of helping our students value social and academic competence enough to walk the road to success. In short, student endorsement permeates everything. Without it, they won't want to learn from us.

Whenever we teach a new behavior, we seek student endorsement. Then we continue to seek that endorsement when we tend to the behavior all year long. Every correction, every review of the procedure, carries with it an effort to keep our students with us, keep them allied in the understanding that this is important for our community and for them as individuals. Consider the following set of questions for creating endorsement when setting up group work routines. Each question invites students to look inward for reasons to endorse the behavioral goals.

Why are we here? What's the purpose of attending school? What are your personal goals?

Why is it important to listen to each other? What will be the payoffs?

What should group work time look, sound, and feel like if we're going to achieve those goals?

Now consider this set, which garners endorsement for maintaining this routine all year:

What should you be doing right now to be successful in this project?

Ask yourself whether your group worked together using the skills for success that we listed.

The research tells us that student achievement improves dramatically when we find usable, classroom-friendly techniques to increase student motivation. So we use language,

relationship, shared goals, intentional structures, and incremental growth to steadily invite students to endorse the idea of building their academic and social skills.

Seeing Everything, and then Acting

“Withitness,” as defined by educational researcher Jacob Kounin, is a teacher’s communication through her *actions* that she knows what her students are doing moment by moment, all around the room. It’s not enough to merely *say* to a class, “I know what’s going on.” The teacher must make her keen awareness of behavior apparent by what she does. (Kounin, 1970) Teachers skilled in withitness see everything, and they take action—both to reinforce the positive and redirect the negative. Although this book focuses on discipline, this quality applies to all things academic as well. Teachers who possess the quality of withitness notice all students as they work, watching for those who are struggling, and offering ready assistance. When we quickly address academic needs, we also head off student frustrations that can manifest in negative behaviors. In such actions, we fulfill students’ need for competence by diverting potential disruptions into recognition for growing academic skills. It’s all connected.

Withitness begins with noticing. A teacher never has the luxury of focusing on one thing at a time. The radar is constantly scanning the room. Some moves and sounds are just the noise of productive work. Others are distractions which can escalate quickly into disruptions. The teacher makes hundreds of small corrective moves in response to the potentially disruptive items. *Carolyn, focus. Marshall, what’s the first step your group needs to take? It sounds a little restless in here. Take a breath, settle yourself, and focus on your work. Raise your hand if you need my help.* She moves closer to one student, tells another to change places with a third.

To develop my withitness, I follow the wisdom of sweating the small stuff—I look after the little things. I am aware of how much I scan the room. Sometimes I think it is a curse to be so aware, to be acting on all I see. It is exhausting! But it is much more exhausting to not do so. Before I developed this skill, I was putting out bigger fires.

I do a number of things to support my withitness. I set up my room so I can see everybody all the time. When students are doing small-group work, I circulate throughout the room. I put reminders to myself in discreet places about things I need to do. I include prompts for teacher language, such as remembering to say “I notice...” when talking with students about their behavior. I remind myself to move slowly, use a calm voice, and consider proximity. I check in more with these reminders when I am feeling impatient.

When modeling expectations, I tell the students I will be noticing little things and correcting. Then they watch to see if I am doing what I said I would do. The payoff comes when our mutual vigilance shows that I mean what I say. I think the students feel like they are in an environment that is safe and respectful. They know I am going to do my best to not let things get out of hand. This can be especially important to bringing out some of the more introverted students.

I increase my vigilance in general when the students appear more active or unfocused, and during the typically more challenging times of the year—before break, near the end of the year, etc. In between these periods we have stretches where we are in the flow. The *students* are being withit! Essentially, when I use my withitness, I model what being on task, being effective in your job, looks like. Then they can mirror that.

—Middle level math teacher, St. Paul MN

Structuring teaching for equitable participation supports positive learning behavior

A defining characteristic of this kind of vigilance at its best is the nurturing element in it. The spirit of it is: *I watch for what might be going wrong because I want to help us keep things going right, and I know we can.* More like a herding dog than a wolf on the watch, there is no “pounce” in effective withitness, just a steady commitment to keep nudging things to where they need to be for excellence in learning.

It’s a slow business, however, becoming highly aware and then able to act in many possible ways to avert, divert, and correct at the same time as I’m doing a demonstration or lecturing. It’s definitely a rub-your-stomach-and-pat-your-head kind of existence—all day long! There is the quality of an alert animal to it—watching everywhere, scanning, making a quick move, then back to watching.

Some ways to increase your capacity for withitness are:

- Arrange the room so you can see everything and everybody fairly easily
- Consistently scan the room
- Organize your lessons so you don’t have to search for things while lecturing, demonstrating, or facilitating discussions
- Separate students who trigger each other into rule-breaking so you avoid hot spots in the room that may distract you from other smaller infractions
- Videotape your students while you are teaching, and watch for what you missed
- Have a colleague observe you and tell you of *all* infractions that occurred while you were instructing, so you can learn about those you missed

It’s definitely worth the effort. Researcher Marzano found in a meta-analysis of more than 100 reports on behavior management that “...the mental set necessary for effective classroom management requires teachers to cultivate a mindful stance relative to their ‘withitness’ [as defined by Kounin] and ‘emotional objectivity.’” Of the different elements of classroom management Marzano noted, the use of withitness showed the greatest decrease in behavior disruptions—42%. (Marzano 2003, 66)

Engaging Instruction

When I was teaching, I never sent a student to the principal’s office. I worked very hard to make all my lessons engaging. That was my main discipline method. Basically, it worked.

—Principal, grades 6-10 school, St. Paul MN

A behavior management strategy that is often not perceived as an element of good discipline is the way we dish up our lessons. One of the best ways to keep hallways clear, referrals to the office down, and everyone on the right academic track is to make learning engaging. And the most effective way to accomplish this is to make it active, interactive, relevant, choiceful, and fun. An engaging lesson is perhaps the best management tactic we have to avoid disruptions in the first place. We want our students to perceive our classroom as the place to be, so that missing it because of poor behavior is not attractive.

Student engagement is of primary importance to supporting positive behavior; this book devotes a chapter to it. See Chapter 6 for ways to structure lessons for a minimum of behavior disruptions and maximum participation through:

- good timing and flow
- variety
- differentiation
- personal connection to content
- content which is developmentally appropriate

When content is connected to the lives and concerns of students, they are much more likely to feel that we know and care about them. At every opportunity, we can ask the kind of open-ended questions that allow our students to make connections that engage them—connections to other experiences they have had, things they have studied, concerns in their personal lives. The more relevant the topics and the more we allow students to construct their own understanding of what we are presenting to them, the more they will trust us to guide them socially and academically.

Being Strategic, Not Formulaic

Developmental growth is gradual and irregular. We need to teach the skills necessary for social, emotional, physical, moral, and intellectual growth incrementally and systematically. We may begin each teaching year holding almost all the power, but slowly, methodically, and consciously, we can hand pieces of it over to our students. The approach we are after is a planned, organized introduction to students of all the routines and strategies they need to be successful in school. Chapters 4 and 5 describe those strategies in detail, including the order and manner in which to introduce them. The goal is to create a scaffold upon which students can climb, safely and steadily, to responsible independence.

When there are missteps in the journey, when students abuse privileges, break rules, defy our authoritative guidance, we can take back some or all of the power, and quickly act to get them back on the right path. We can use the structures described in this book to slowly build their competencies for handling things well themselves, one step at a time. See Chapters 7 and 8 about redirecting and problem-solving.

All of this takes planning, and a toolbox of strategies the teacher can use to build a scaffold to master each routine—logistical, social, and academic—of the school day.

The operating principle here is: *assume nothing and teach everything*. What to teach and when to teach it is guided by a carefully designed structure accompanied by, as always, encouraging and empowering language. In this manner, we can head off many behavior problems before they happen. We can even introduce structures to correct rule-breaking before rules are broken. But inevitably they will be broken, and then, after the consequences relevant to the misbehavior have been administered respectfully and realistically, we begin anew to build social capacity and nudge toward responsible independence.

Matching the support to the student

Here's where the strategic part comes in. The choice of *what* consequence—what reminder or redirection to use when, the decision about whether a conference is necessary and whether it's a quick exchange at the side of the room or a meeting with parents and perhaps other staff present—must be decided moment by moment, infraction by infraction, student by student. Although everyone benefits from the initial detailed introduction of a routine, the slow drip of friendly reminders, and occasional corrections, for some they are not enough. In other words, it is necessary for all, but not sufficient for some.

Some students need more frequent correction that goes beyond verbal and non-verbal reminders—perhaps temporary loss of privilege or quick problem-solving conferences, or perhaps they need to learn to repair the damage they do. And there are still other students for whom all of this is necessary but *still* not sufficient. For them, we have longer conferences, perhaps involving administration and/or family. We work out individual plans and strategize with colleagues about best approaches.

There are no formulas for action. There is no “step” plan, no pre-charted course when students require redirection or problem-solving. We don't count infractions and build a pyramid of punishments. Every day we begin fresh. Every misstep is corrected, and then we move on. Nothing is ignored. Every little bit of rule-breaking is addressed, but not with recrimination or the goal of inflicting suffering. Our eyes are on the prize: fixing what's broken so we can move on towards responsible independence for every student. Some may end the year remarkably able to self-manage; some may seem stuck. But we are in relationship with every student. All get caring treatment, but each response to misbehavior depends upon the circumstances peculiar to it.

This takes teachers who operate with their weight forward on their toes, ready to move in whichever direction their best judgment indicates. It takes good relationships with colleagues who help you figure things out, and it takes a commitment to reflection.

Collaborating with Colleagues: Being a team player

An element of our school day that requires the same commitment to good communication and support as working with students is the opportunity teachers have to help one another. When relationships among a staff are good, when teachers can go to each other for help and strategize together about how to best correct and guide an erring

student, they are almost unbeatable. A healthy adult community within a school staff, with high levels of cooperation and trust, provides the kind of school climate young people need for success.

Anthony Bryk, among others, has found that successful schools are those where the adult community, including administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents, work together in positive, transparent, collegial ways. His study of effective schools within the Chicago Public Schools and in some inner-ring suburbs found that trust among adults and strong, positive administrative leadership were the two most important factors related to student achievement. (Bryk and Schneider 2002)

[R]elational trust supports a moral imperative to take on the difficult work of school improvement. Most teachers work hard at their teaching. When implementing “reform,” they must assume risks, deal with organizational conflict, attempt new practices, and take on extra work... Teachers quite reasonably ask, “Why should we do this?” A context characterized by high relational trust provides an answer: In the end, reform is the right thing to do. (Bryk and Schneider 2002, 43)

Appendix G touches upon the adult community in its discussion of school-wide discipline, but a complete exploration of this important subject is beyond the scope of this book.

The Habit of Reflection

Ideally, in life we would be granted a few minutes after each thing we did to take inventory of what worked and what didn’t, and to plan adjustments for next time. This is the optimal learning cycle for excellence—for both teachers and students. In school, however, we have no luxury of time: our next group enters on the heels of the one leaving, and we make adjustments on the fly. The challenge is to make the best ones for the results we are seeking. For that we need to cultivate the skill of habitual reflection.

One group of researchers notes, “High levels of student learning require high levels of staff competence.” They list a number of ways that reflection brings increased competence to teaching practice, including opportunities to continuously learn, avoid repeating aspects of your practice that aren’t working, and generate a greater variety of perspectives when facing challenges. (York-Barr et al. 2001, 8)

A menu of standard reflection questions

Ideally, reflection occurs both individually and with colleagues. What help make it habitual are familiar structures that provide the containers for our thoughts. For example, a set of general reflection questions can guide us as we think about the progress we’re making with students:

How can I better meet my students’ needs for autonomy, competence, relationship, and fun?

What’s working well? What’s not?

What should I change?

What behavior routines and expectations do I need to revisit?

Where can I turn for help?

How specific and descriptive is my language when I reinforce my students?

What can I do to help a student who's having trouble?

How well do I share power in my classroom?

Am I remaining objective, even clinical, in the face of disruptions?

Imagine using the few minutes between classes, while you are gathering what you need to teach, to have a brief internal reflective dialogue with one of these questions (perhaps your “question for today”) to help you better learn from your experience:

I had to redirect Stephen four times in class. He did finally get to work for the last 15 minutes of class. What was the last redirection that I used—the one that stuck? Oh, yes, I asked him to move away from the group and work on his own. Maybe his struggle is social. Write a note to myself to observe next time.

Reflection on the effectiveness of discipline practices are found throughout this book (for example, see reflection questions for the Social Contract on page 78, and about choosing the right redirection on page 183-86). We use the abbreviation *PWR* as shorthand for the cycle of:

P: Thinking about how best to do what you will do (plan)

W: Doing it (work)

R: Thinking about what you did so you can do better next time (review)

This is the cycle of learning that all successful people use. We call it the Reflective Loop. It gives us insight into who we are, how we are, and how we can better become the teachers we dream of being. Learn more about the Reflective Loop on page 101.

[K]nowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. (Palmer 1998, 2)

TEACHER REJUVENATION

Even just thinking about all the qualities it takes for optimal teaching can be tiring. In real school life, we know that our most rigorous growth-mindset and our most well-developed skills can falter if we don't take care to recharge our power-sharing batteries. What we know in our hearts is that tending to our own well-being, often the last thing on our minds in school, can leverage everything else we are doing and becoming.

As an aid to our task of tending ourselves, we offer here a few examples teachers have shared with us of ways they defuse and refocus in the face of difficulty or weariness. The suggestions fall into four realms: in class, during teaching time; in school, when students aren't present; with colleagues; and outside school. As this sample list suggests, avenues of rejuvenation are many, and each of us uses methods that suit us. Whatever it takes, we know we need to establish habits of living that nurture our teacher selves.

During class, I...

Sing a song; do a quick sketch

Use a mantra: whisper "Patience" to myself

Say "Stop" to the negative thinking

Say to myself, "If you're in a hole, stop digging!"

Play Mozart (or ____) during class

Smile or laugh with students—tell a joke or a funny story; read Shel Silverstein

Play a quick game or movement activity, perhaps student-led

Ask students to stand up and turn in a circle (turn the day around)

Do jumping jacks together

Sip something warm—coffee or tea

Take 5 while students quietly read

Soften voice

Take an impromptu class field trip within the school

Remember that students aren't out to get you

Mentally scan body & relax muscles

Count backwards silently

In school, when students aren't present, I...

Relax with a magazine article

Close eyes and repeat mantra "Relax"

Talk with colleagues who can lift my spirits

Organize or clean up something

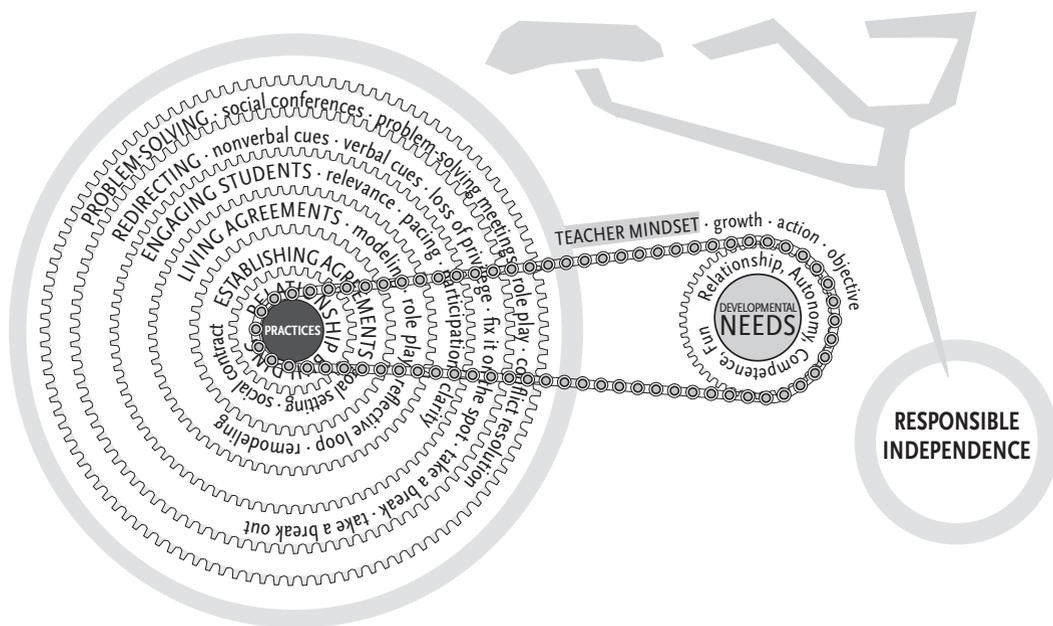
Power nap

Eat an apple
Play games with students at recess
Call a friend or my partner to get moral support
Send an email to a friend
Cross things off my “To Do” list
Remember that students want to learn
Sit at the rowdy table during lunch
Write in journal
Visit the library or another quiet place

With colleagues, I...

Walk at lunch
“Primal scream”
Carpool and share positive reflections
Eat—healthy food, staff cookouts
Laugh
Say friendly hellos throughout the day
Have a staff wellness day with massages and bio rhythm readings
Share stories and get positive feedback from colleagues
Make wellness pacts (walking teams, weight-loss support)
Tell positive jokes
Use community-building structures for staff or team meetings
Outside of school, I try to remember what’s not working and plan to fix it,
and what *is* working, and celebrate it!

There’s no question that maintaining a productive mindset and building a rich skillset are demanding challenges. Tending ourselves along the way becomes not merely a helpful thing to do, but a life-saver. It supports the whole. It is also helpful to realize that in interesting ways, the frames of mind necessary for successful teaching help support each other. Urgency feeds commitment. Commitment feeds objectivity and the courage to act. And a growth mindset helps us be patient and humble enough to seek solutions that work wherever we can find them. Getting in the flow of teaching through any one of these avenues can open the way to the others. So here we go, beginning where we are, and knowing well the prize we seek.



TEACHER MINDSET: Getting in Gear for Responsible Independence