

Introducing Responsible Independence

In my second year of teaching, I had two boys who were well-behaved in my class when I was teaching, but when I had a substitute, they made big trouble. They couldn't seem to control themselves with a guest teacher. I decided that the next time I needed a substitute I would arrange for them to attend class in a colleague's room during the time they were supposed to be in my class. That worked, and I got a good report from my colleague and from the substitute when I returned to school. I planned to do the same thing the next time I had to miss a day.

In a conversation with my mother, I told her about how I had solved the problem I'd been having with these two boys. "Well," she said, "I think before you send them off again you should ask yourself: Where are you headed with these children?" I thought about her question, and I realized that what I really wanted was not just to avoid a problem for me, but for them to grow in social skills so they could follow our agreements and use their self-controls every day, no matter who the teacher was.

The next day, I began to prepare them for a good day every day, including the ones when I wasn't there. I expressed my belief that they could be successful on their own, and promised I would show them how.

The next time I needed a substitute, I gave them the chance to stay in my room and manage themselves, and they handled it just fine. Ever since, the question, "Where am I headed with this student?" has become a touchstone for me. The answer always leads to growth for my students and for me.

—Middle level teacher, St. Paul MN

Where Are We Headed? Responsible Independence

This book is about student growth. It describes how to build a classroom climate in which students become responsibly independent because adults guide them incrementally toward the emotional, social, and academic skills necessary for successful self-management.

Being both independent and responsible benefits students and everyone around them. Independence means they are able to learn without constant assistance and to work productively without prodding. Responsibility means they take learning seriously and interact with others in ways that support learning. Nobody makes it alone in school. Misbehavior disrupts everyone, and a friendly, safe classroom empowers everyone. The time we invest in teaching adolescents the social/emotional skills of self-management pays off in a healthy school climate, the best possible setting for academic excellence.

What motivates students to follow the rules?

Adolescents may be motivated to behave in a consistently responsible way for a variety of reasons. In our approach, within the goal of responsible independence lies a deeper aim: building in our students the capacity to relate their behavior to the good of all, to become aware that everyone wins when everyone behaves responsibly. Many middle school students, even some who behave well, have yet to develop the desire to follow their school rules *because they want to support the community*. Getting to that level takes time and a great deal of guidance from adults determined that the adolescents in their care will develop responsible behavior that is increasingly motivated by their desire that others, not just they, do well.

Many theorists have addressed the issue of motivation. John Dewey, the 20th-century philosopher, psychologist, and educator, saw learning how to effectively participate in a democracy as the chief purpose of schooling. Without guidance, he said, young people would operate entirely out of convenience. Leaders dedicated to the common good would not emerge, and the electorate would not be wise enough to make good choices for society. Dewey insisted that we must teach our youth to think well and with a social spirit for our country to thrive.

In so far as the school represents, in its own spirit, a genuine community life; in so far as what are called school discipline, government, order, etc., are the expressions of this inherent social spirit... the school is organized on an ethical basis. (Dewey 1909, 43-44)

According to Lawrence Kohlberg's Six Stages of Moral Development, to operate out of universal principles of conscience, a commitment to others that supersedes even our own self-interest, requires the highest level of moral development.

Kohlberg's work on moral thinking in children up to age 16 resulted in a theory of stages of moral development. The six stages show a movement toward altruism:

- Stage 1. Obedience and Punishment (Can I get away with it?)
- Stage 2. Self-interest (What's best for me?)
- Stage 3. Interpersonal Relationships (I wouldn't do that to my friend or my mother)
- Stage 4. Maintaining the Social Order (It's against the law)
- Stage 5. Maintaining Individual Rights (Everyone has inalienable rights)
- Stage 6. Universal Principles (It's the right and just thing to do) (Kohlberg 1981)

In studying the means by which young people in a democracy develop social consciousness, Sheldon Berman synthesizes the research in fields such as moral and social development, political socialization, and citizenship education. He posits a theoretical framework for educators using social consciousness and social responsibility as its central organizing constructs.

This new framework treats the development of one's relationship with the political and social world and one's personal investment in the well-being of others and the planet as a central concern. (Berman 1997, 9)

The goal of making choices in the context of social responsibility is a moving target for both youth and adults. We move toward it throughout our lives. Effective behavior management is rife with opportunities to initiate and facilitate the journey.

Conversely, autocratic, punitive, or chaotic behavior management can slow or damage the process.

We do not expect that adolescent students in our care will become entirely altruistic! Our intention is to be an influence in the direction of consideration for others as well as themselves. We seek to engage students in an ongoing conversation about creating and living by rules, a conversation designed to benefit everyone.

Michelle did well in school and had lots of friends. Because she was especially good at helping other kids settle arguments, she became one of our best peer mediators. But when Michelle herself broke a rule or got into a disagreement with someone, she frequently told the story of what happened in a confusing way that didn't fit the facts. People gave her the benefit of the doubt because she was such a nice kid and came from a large family that supported school projects and events enthusiastically.

One day Michelle had taken school equipment outside when she was told not to. She kept insisting that nobody had told her, even though she and I knew that wasn't true. Finally I said to her, "Michelle, you are lying." Her face crumpled. "I know. I couldn't help it—it just came out." Through tears she asked, "What's the matter with me? I don't know why I lie. I can't stop! I do it at home, too. I'm the only one in my family who does it—my brothers get into trouble, but they admit what they did."

Michelle and I had a conversation about habits and conscious choices, and about the kind of person she wanted to be. Together, we made a plan for her to break her bad habit. We practiced, and I promised to check in with her now and then. By the end of the year, Michelle was doing well. Occasionally she would slip into a lie, but she soon repaired the damage by admitting the truth. Most of the time she told the truth in the first place.

—Principal, Northfield MN

Michelle was operating at a level of social consciousness lower than her own standards for being a good person. That's what the tears were about, and that's why she worked so hard to transform her bad habit. She moved from lying because she could get away with it to telling the truth because her family was honest and she didn't want to be the one who lied. She didn't want her brothers and her parents to think badly of her, or others to think badly of her family because of her behavior. Kohlberg would describe her growth as a move from Stage 1 to Stage 3. Dewey might say that she had begun to make decisions based on other than temporary convenience, moving from thinking only of herself to considering the effect of her behavior upon others. Educator-author Ruth Charney would say that she was developing "the capacity to care for oneself, for others, and for the world." (Charney 2002, 15)

What does it mean to be independent?

To be independent is to feel the power of freedom, to feel that you can navigate through life without others constantly propping you up or directing you. Adolescents, on the cusp of adulthood, crave that freedom. They've had enough of childhood dependency, and they have muscles to flex!

We need them to be able to stand alone in order to learn well. They have assignments to monitor, research to do, deadlines to meet, homework, test preparation, and projects to make to show what they know. The trick is to give them enough freedom to expand and develop, but not so much that they fail. Piece by piece, we need to share

our power with them. Eventually, they will stand on their own in life, and the best way to help them get there is to have them take their early steps under the supervision of caring adults who can help them use their power wisely.

What does it mean to be responsible?

Responsible students show their capacity to handle independence with self-control, good judgment, reasoning, and focus. We give them projects to work on independently, and they have more opportunities to make decisions and explore because we know they can handle them. Becoming a responsible person has great value to our students. It provides them:

The capacity to think long-term, beyond the impulse of the moment, so they can achieve their goals: *I can delay gratification for a long-term, more important benefit.*

The ability to consider what is good for the group as well as for themselves: *I can learn better in an orderly setting with others learning all around me.*

Responsible independence requires us to go beyond compliance to social competence

There are basically two ways to build in young people behavior that respects the rules of a group. One is to demand compliance—make clear rules, and then enforce them with punishments for those who break them and rewards for those who comply. But students who follow rules out of fear of punishment can hardly be trusted with a lot of independence if their rule-abiding behavior occurs only when they think they might be watched and reported. If we want students to think for themselves and act for the good of all, then we can't settle for mere compliance with the rules.

[R]esearch revealed that not only tangible rewards but also threats, deadlines, directives, pressured evaluations, and imposed goals diminish intrinsic motivation because, like tangible rewards, they conduce toward an external perceived locus of causality. In contrast, choice, acknowledgment of feelings, and opportunities for self-direction were found to enhance intrinsic motivation because they allow people a greater feeling of autonomy. (Deci and Ryan 1985, 70)

The other way to foster respectful behavior is through mentorship, guiding students step by wobbly step to develop the habit of caring for others as well as themselves, the internally-based motivation to do so, and the thinking skills to figure out how. The result is approval not only from adults, but from themselves.

The establishment of self-approval is the strongest form of control. When thought of in this manner, discipline ceases to be a restriction. As teachers, we should no longer think of discipline in terms of an authority figure who rules with an iron fist. We need to think of discipline in terms of a leader who permits freedom within certain limits. (Dreikurs 1998, 81)

If we train our children to take orders, to do things simply because they are told to, and fail to give them confidence to act and think for themselves, we are putting an almost insurmountable obstacle in the way of ... establishing the truth of democratic ideals. (Dewey 1909, 304)

Responsibility and independence are interwoven in this behavior management approach, so that each nudges the other forward gradually, with the robust and con-

sistent support of the teacher. Most important, the approach provides the tools necessary to guide students toward self-management and to maintain order in a classroom sustained by healthy relationships and fun. We are the bow, they are the arrows; fulfillment is in their successful flight.

How Will We Get There? By Meeting Adolescent Needs

One way or another, adolescents will meet their needs. Our job is to help them do so in ways that support their growth and learning. What are their basic needs? Several psychologists have made lists of them. In this approach, we draw from Rudolf Dreikurs, Abraham Maslow, William Glasser, SEL (social-emotional learning) research, and the work of psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan to create our list of the needs that appear to be especially dominant in adolescents: *relationship, autonomy, competence, and fun*.

[I] believe we are genetically programmed to try to satisfy four psychological needs: love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. All our behavior is always our best choice, at the time we make the choice, to satisfy one or more of these needs. (Glasser 1998, 28)

Deci and Ryan’s research examined social conditions that enhance versus undermine intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and well-being: “The findings have led to the postulate of three innate psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—which when satisfied yield enhanced self-motivation and mental health and when thwarted lead to diminished motivation and well-being.” (Deci and Ryan 2000, 68)

Adolescents express these four needs in particularly intense ways. Sometimes they know what they’re looking for and how to find it: they seek appropriate friendships, have fun, find positive ways of being in control, and are on the lookout for opportunities to share their abilities and talents with their peers. This is partly why teaching them can be a joy.

At other times, though, adolescents are ill-equipped, clumsy, and dangerous to themselves and/or others. Their needs are strong, sometimes confusing, and they struggle to find their way. Theirs can be a meandering, perilous journey, often without destination. This is part of why teaching them can be quite a challenge!

Developmental science shows that there is more impulse than control in the adolescent brain. “The parts of the brain responsible for things like sensation-seeking are getting turned on in big ways around the time of puberty,” says Temple University psychologist Laurence Steinberg. “But the parts for exercising judgment are still maturing throughout the course of adolescence. So you’ve got this time gap between when things impel kids toward taking risks early in adolescence, and when things that allow people to think before they act come online. It’s like turning on the engine of a car without a skilled driver at the wheel.” (Wallis 2004, 61)

See Appendix A for more research-based information about adolescent social, intellectual, and physical development.

Helping Adolescents Meet their Needs Constructively

Both before things go wrong and after rules are broken, our job is to work with students so their needs are met in such a way that they can achieve sustained, incremental growth toward responsible independence. We promote and support peer community, develop positive mentor-apprentice relationships, explicitly cultivate social skills, teach about behavior limitations, give choices, and build success upon success, one action at a time. In these ways, we guide young people to find ways to satisfy their basic needs constructively.

Citing studies conducted between 1998 and 2001, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning reports that learning is possible only when students' social, emotional, and physical needs are met. When those needs are met, students are more likely to succeed in school. (CASEL 2003, 7)

Relationship

As children enter adolescence, peer relationships become more and more the focus of their interest and concern. At their best, these relationships foster a sense of connection and belonging and can inspire students to grow. But in the process of seeking relationship, some may feel terribly lonely because of a lack of social skills. Cliques develop in middle school and segment the student body. Students who lack social capital may become loners, and some may seek out destructive relationships.

Meeting the need

We can't address all the causes of adolescent relationship angst, but we can structure into daily teaching the capacity to develop self-knowledge, healthy peer connections, and meaningful teacher-student relationships. We can invite students to become known by sharing about themselves; we can orchestrate gatherings with relationship-building in mind; we can engage in individual and group conversations, and teach with activities that help everyone get to know one another, and we can build opportunities into learning for positive social interaction and fun.

We can prepare students to understand and follow the rules, and when rules are broken, we can maintain positive relationships through redirections that are fair and consistent, and grant dignity to all, even when they break rules. When a young person begins to feel the power of being able to repair damage without the sting of punishment or rejection, she can continue to trust that the relationship behind the redirection is positive. Students perform at their best socially and academically in an atmosphere of trust. (See Chapter 3 for more on the importance of building trust in relationships.)

In the area of social-emotional development, young adolescents

- Have a strong need to belong to a group, with approval of peers becoming as important as adult approval, and on some matters even more important.
- In their search for group membership, may experience significant embarrassment, ridicule, or rejection from those in other cliques from which they are excluded. (NMSA 2003, 49)

Autonomy

When students seek autonomy, their need for control can manifest itself in power struggles. They are dependent on parents and other adults, but they want to make their own decisions. (NMSA 2003, 49) Their growing ability to think abstractly can spur a determination to understand and participate in decision-making. They may assert their independence in ways that put them at risk when they lack the maturity to guide themselves safely. At worst, they separate into disconnected rebels, or start competing against teachers or each other for supremacy.

Meeting the need

At its best, the urge for autonomy channels into independent accomplishment and peer leadership. We can watch for opportunities to put students in charge of themselves, and sometimes others, so they get their need for autonomy met appropriately. We can give them opportunities to lead, and we can teach them how to manage their own behavior, including being responsible to fix problems. We can make our redirections constructive, and use them to advance self-control and minimize future rule-breaking. We can teach students to reflect on their behavior and talk with them about the ways we will support them so they grow toward following the rules for reasons that are increasingly their own.

We must steadily work toward increased student autonomy. If we rule our classrooms as autocrats who are the deciders and enforcers of everything, doling out punishments and rewards using standards that we alone decide, at best we will get short-term, fear-based compliance from students who are intimidated, angry, or biding their time to seek revenge, depending upon their personalities.

Many students under autocratic teacher rule fail to develop a belief in their capacity to control their own behavior. Deci's research found that teachers most effectively supported student autonomy when they shared their authority and allowed students to play a role in meaningful decision-making. (Deci 1995, 144) They certainly don't get any training in it if we hold onto the reins tightly at all times. And, as with any workers, they are unlikely to produce creative, highest quality work in an atmosphere that suggests they are powerless.

On the other hand, if we give away too much power too fast, the classroom can become dominated by disruptive peers. Students don't feel safe in an unpredictable environment, and little work of quality is accomplished.

The ideal is an approach in which power is shared incrementally, and students are given as much responsibility as they can handle. What to allow shifts and changes as students develop their social and academic competencies in the two-steps-forward-one-step-back manner characteristic of young adolescents testing and experimenting.

Competence

Young adolescents observe the strengths of adults. They frequently evaluate their own competencies, and are prone to self-criticize. Compared to adults or peers, they may perceive themselves as inadequate physically, socially, and/or intellectually, and pre-

maturely close doors to exploring interests. (NMSA 2003, 46) Discouragement can feed a sense of helplessness or distaste for the school environment in which they keep coming up short. When they have talents, they may choose to share them at the wrong time, pounding rhythms on their desks while others try to concentrate, or making long passes down the hallway. They may also show their competencies constructively through peer-to-peer help or by leading parts of a class meeting or teaching a skill or game.

Meeting the need

What can we do to build the skills and confidence we wish our students to have? Make sure they experience successes so they feel and become more and more competent. Assume nothing, and continually show them examples of the right way to behave. Provide opportunities to practice routines and procedures. Keep paying attention—there are no teacher vacations inside a middle school classroom! Every unaddressed act of rule-breaking, no matter how small, is likely to escalate.

Give students daily, frequent opportunities to think about what and how they have done, what they have said, and how they might have affected others. Teach them to reflect, so they can learn from their actions. Create personal and larger world connections to what they are learning to satisfy their growing intellectual curiosity about their place in the world. Help them develop the powerful cognitive skill of taking on the perspective of another, through interesting conversations that provide opportunities to think from more than one point of view.

In his review of the research, Sheldon Berman identifies providing students with opportunities to consider the needs, thoughts, feelings, and motivations of others as important to the development of social responsibility: “Perspective-taking and perspective-taking dialogue are the linchpins in social, moral, and political development. They are also vital to the effective handling of social, moral, and political conflict. In fact, it is the combination of perspective-taking and conflict that most studies point to as the moving forces in development.” (Berman 1997, 98)

We can talk to students with respect, even when they have messed up, and redirect their behavior so they learn how to live within the rules, with consideration for themselves and others. The more they learn, the more we can loosen the reins, and the greater the sense of competence and autonomy our students will feel and exhibit in their journey toward self-management and academic success.

Fun

Adolescents love to play and laugh and move; their developing bodies crave the stimulation and excitement of good times. However, seeking fun, students might want to pass notes, engage in horseplay, chat, or tease. Although what students might do to amuse themselves can interfere with the learning process, their love of fun can also spark their learning, both social and academic.

Meeting the need

It is both our pleasure and our responsibility to make sure our students get their need for fun fulfilled constructively in academic and social contexts, or they will find pleasures that interfere with learning. For one thing, we have to let them move. Being

confined to chairs and desks is challenging and could be physically painful. Let them move and play a bit—they live for light moments, and a school day of unmitigated seriousness is practically unbearable for them. And as an added bonus, mixing and matching teams in unlikely ways in the context of playful activities helps discourage exclusion and cliques.

In the area of physical development, young adolescents

- Need to release energy, often resulting in sudden, apparently meaningless outbursts of activity.
- Experience restlessness and fatigue due to hormonal changes. (NMSA 2003, 44)

Knowing their needs can help us diagnose student problems

Some problem behaviors adolescents exhibit at school can drive teachers right out of the profession. Underneath those behaviors, we can find mistaken attempts to satisfy the four needs we have noted. Identifying what a student is really seeking when he or she breaks the rules can be the beginning of solving the problem. See Appendix F for some examples.

An alternative approach [to creating responsible behavior] begins not with blame and control, but with asking why people are behaving irresponsibly in the first place.... This approach takes the individual's perspective, and focuses on the motivation underlying that behavior. It then addresses the factors that can lead people to behave more responsibly. (Deci 1995, 2)

In the first semester, I used the Take a Break room outside of my classroom 42 times. Asked to reflect on what need they were trying to fulfill when they disrupted the class, 23 students checked on their reflection forms "I wanted to have some fun." Almost as many just wanted to talk or relax. Simply put, fun and relating to others are very important to middle school students, and sometimes these needs can get in the way of learning. What I saw from my little study was that the more I intentionally built into my lessons opportunities for fun, social interaction, and learning in a relaxed environment, the better climate I'd have. It was clear to me that every period of my day—not just advisory/homeroom— needed to have a built-in opportunity for positive fun.

—7th and 8th grade teacher, Minneapolis MN

Scope of the Book

Meeting adolescent needs requires a variety of structures

It is one thing to talk about the importance of social-emotional learning and quite another to provide the means for achieving such growth. A variety of effective practical structures is necessary to help us through the complexities of building responsible, independent learners.

The structures described in this book are based on the *Developmental Designs* approach, integrating social and academic learning for adolescent students. They allow us to teach social skills, establish and uphold rules, and help students solve problems while we maintain good relationships with them. Each structure is shaped to address adolescent developmental needs, and all of the tactics and strategies have been classroom-tested, practiced by middle school educators in the United States and in Canada.

The tools we use to foster order and meaningful learning build social skills at the same time. They include structures for

- establishing relationship
- establishing purposes and goals for being in school
- establishing agreements about rules by which the community is made secure enough for all to achieve their goals
- living our agreements in our daily routines
- engaging students in learning and away from misbehavior
- redirecting rule-breaking that damages the learning climate
- thinking reflectively about actions, social and academic, to maintain a course of constant growth
- problem-solving with chronic rule-breakers

Problem-solving structures address and help prevent chronic rule-breaking in the classroom, but these structures are useful and important for *all* students to guide them toward responsible independence. Throughout the book, we suggest teacher language that cultivates and preserves relationships while it supports the rules that bind the community, to ensure that the container is fit to carry the message we want to send: *I know you and believe in your capacity to grow, and I am committed to helping you correct yourself every time you break our agreements.*

Guidance with rigor and relationship

Our goal in this needs-based approach to behavior management is to use the most rigorous guidance possible with adolescent students while still providing the freedom to explore learning, and to nurture the relationships and fun that make that exploration safe and attractive. We use the components that work best as described in Robert Marzano's meta-analysis of research reports about classroom behavior management (note the percentage of decrease in rule-breaking that each produced):

1. An understanding that healthy relationships are crucial in all phases (28% decrease)
2. A set of clear rules and procedures that are carefully introduced with no assumptions that students already should or do know them (32% decrease)
3. Reinforcement of those guidelines and procedures and respectful interventions for all rule-breaking to preserve the integrity of the rules and the continuous progress of students in gaining social competency (31% decrease)
4. Cultivation of a teaching mindset—a stance relative to teacher “withitness” (see page 33) and emotional objectivity—that underlies and supports all interactions with students (40% decrease)

See Chapter 2 for a detailed description of the mindset and skills that educators need to draw upon to power them through the process of meeting students’ needs and guiding them to responsible independence.

Classroom Discipline: Guiding Adolescents to Responsible Independence is designed as a practical guidebook for effectively preventing and handling misbehaviors in the classroom while building social competence and a strong connection with school. Rule-breaking that requires intervention beyond the classroom is discussed briefly in Appendix G, but the main emphasis here is on empowering the classroom teacher of adolescents to use behavior-management approaches that can launch our students into life with the power of independence and the strength and protection of responsibility.

