

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.

Read more about how to maximize learning time and teach behavior self-management in *Classroom Discipline*.