

# Packaged Discipline Programs: Let the Buyer Beware

The appeal of packaged programs is also their major drawback—the quick results they yield come at the expense of developing responsible students who understand the important principles on which rules are based.

Educators consistently feel the need to accomplish miracles. Given far too few hours and resources to accomplish all that is expected of them, many buy packaged curriculum and training programs. While short training programs and packaged materials can save precious time, such programs can also yield negative effects upon certain efforts, such as school and classroom discipline. It is easy to understand the appeal of packaged discipline programs that are advertised as easy to learn and quick to implement. But it is folly to believe that a process as complex as managing student behavior can be understood in a brief inservice at the beginning of school or in a two-hour session on conference day.

## About Discipline Programs

Every discipline program, prepackaged or not, has in one form or another goals, principles, rules, enforcement or intervention procedures, and an implicit or explicit evaluation process (fig. 1). Each model also sets the stage for incidental or secondary learning by students, who additionally learn about their self-worth, about their ability to handle responsibility, how to solve problems, how much control they have over their lives and how to use that control, and whether or not they can affect the consequences of their behavior.

Most educators agree that secondary or incidental learnings must be carefully considered when assessing the impact of a discipline program. For example, claims such as "Program X yields an 80 percent reduction in referrals for discipline" are often misleading. If teachers do not refer students because they equate discipline referrals with poor teaching, then the program's apparent success might be the result of teacher fear. If Richard shapes up after the third check mark on the chalkboard because the fourth means a phone call home to an abu-

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sive parent, did the program improve his self-control, or did it simply transfer the inner turmoil of a child caught in a dysfunctional family? If Susan is seen by her classmates as responsible for their losing out on a coveted marble in a jar, who assesses the subsequent communications between Susan and her classmates on the playground, on the bus, or in the cafeteria?

Rules are central to all discipline programs, but they can be highly over-emphasized, for conceptual and practical reasons. Both *consequences* and *principles* are more influential for achieving long-term behavior change. Rules work best when they are behavioral and are expressed in black-and-white terms. Thus, students and teacher should easily see whether a specific behavior violates a rule. Examples of rules are: When you want to speak, raise your hand; Bring your books and materials to class; Be in your seat when the bell rings. When rules are vague, students have difficulty making the connection between their behavior and the consequences that follow.

Because principles, unlike rules, cannot be enforced, they are overlooked or ignored by packaged programs. Principles define attitudes and expectations for long-term behavioral growth. Examples of principles are: be respectful, care about others, be prepared. If the teacher attempts to en-

force principles, students may blame the teacher or make excuses by looking for "gray area" loopholes to justify their behavior. When rules are not developed naturally from principles, students learn, for example, to be in their seats when the bell rings without understanding the importance of responsible work habits. Effective discipline programs enforce rules without sacrificing the opportunity for the higher levels of learning that principles provide.

### **Obedience Models**

Packaged programs are by design simple to learn, easy to implement, and quick with results. Their greatest attraction, though, is paradoxically their greatest weakness. To achieve their lofty claims, packaged programs must resort to power-based methods. They rely on an obedience model of discipline (see fig. 2) because "telling students what to do" requires the least amount of work or change on the teacher's part. Obedience models have as their goals (1) minimal or no rule violations and (2) students' following orders. Punishment is the main intervention or enforcement procedure. The results, if the model is successful, are fewer rule violations and less self-discipline; that is, students obey orders but learn little about responsibility.

Unfortunately, both the goals and the results of "obedience" type programs are in direct conflict with one of the main goals of schooling—to teach students responsibility—and one of the main goals of discipline models—to emphasize principles and rules equally.

Another problem common to many packaged programs is that they provide limited opportunity for teacher discretion. Some programs offer only one alternative intervention for teachers when a rule is violated. Others have a lockstep approach that requires a specific intervention for violation number one, another for violation two, and so forth. Either system removes teacher judgment from the process. The result cripples the ability of the teacher to examine rule violations in their broader context. There are a number of factors to consider when choosing an appropriate intervention; yet, when left with only an

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either-or choice, teachers often have no alternative but to look the other way. This is the only way they can factor in special circumstances that don't fit "the program." Thus, in time, built-in inconsistency dooms the program. Even worse, teachers themselves develop an external locus of control since the major decisions are prescribed by the program designers. Under these conditions, teachers either redesign the program or resent using it.

### **Responsibility Models**

Teaching students responsibility is harder to package and requires more effort than teaching them to be obedient. Sometimes progress seems slow because students are in the process of learning. Because teachers desire more than a quick end to disruptions, the results are not always immediately apparent. Teachers have the opportunity to see how they contribute to creating situations that foster discipline problems, for example, by developing lessons that stimulate little motivation, offering students little or no hope for behavioral or academic success, forcing students to back down in

front of their peers, providing students with few choices or none at all, and/or denying students acceptable opportunities to express their feelings.

Misbehavior is often the only way a student can cope with living in an adverse environment. It keeps students sane and maintains their integrity. Discipline models based on punishment do not usually provide students a voice in determining classroom structure, nor do they examine discipline problems from the viewpoint of students. Obedience models are directed far more toward keeping students in line than toward maintaining their dignity.

Models based on teaching responsibility (see fig. 3), therefore, not only take longer to develop and implement, but invite more risk-taking on the part of the teacher. In the long run, however, these models are more effective because they encourage improved teaching as well as improved learning.

"If you want true power, you must give some of it away." The key word in this adage is *some*. For many years, we gave away too much control to stu-

## **For many years, we gave away too much control to students. Now we must be careful not to overreact and try to take all of it back.**

**Goals:** What the program will accomplish.

**Principles:** What general attitude and behavioral guidelines teachers model and students are exposed to and encouraged to learn while in class.

**Rules:** What are enforced every time they are broken.

**Enforcement or intervention:** What happens when a rule is broken.

**Student (incidental) learning:** What the student learns as a result of the enforcement or intervention.

**Evaluation:** How well the program goals are being met.

**Fig. 1. Generic Discipline Model**

**Principle:** Do what I (the teacher or the administrator) want.

**When a student misbehaves (breaks a rule):**

**Punishment is the primary intervention:**

1. External locus of control.
2. Done to student.

**Examples:**

1. Threats.
2. Scoldings.
3. Writing "I will not \_\_\_\_\_" 500 times.
4. Detentions.
5. Writing student's name on chalkboard.

**Student learns:**

1. Don't get caught.
2. It's not my responsibility.

**Fig. 2. Obedience Discipline Model**

dents. Now we must be careful not to overreact and try to take *all* of it back. Students cannot learn responsibility without choices and without opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them.

The responsibility model is far more consistent with the current classroom emphasis on critical thinking and decision making. What do students learn when the curriculum says, "Make decisions based upon critical thinking skills," while they are simultaneously told, "Do what I say, or else you'll have your name written on the blackboard for all to see?"

### The 80-15-5 Principle

The responsibility model is also more consistent with the makeup of most classrooms. Generally, there are three groups of students in a typical classroom. (The percentages may vary from classroom to classroom, but there is consistency in the group structure.)

1. *80 percent.* These students rarely, if ever, break rules or violate principles. They come to school motivated to learn, prepared to work, and accepting of classroom restrictions. By and large, these students have been successful by both formal and informal standards and have every reason to expect success in the future. Most discipline plans are either unnecessary or intrusive to them.

2. *15 percent.* These students break rules on a somewhat regular basis.

They do not blindly accept the classroom principles, and they fight restrictions. Their motivation ranges from completely "on" to completely "off," depending on what happened at home that morning, how they perceive the daily classroom activities, and possibly the shape of the moon. Their achievement can range from high to low, depending on the teacher, the class, or their expectations for success. These students need a clear set of expectations and consequences. If they are not given enough structure, they can disrupt learning for the other students.

3. *5 percent.* These students are chronic rule breakers and out of control most of the time. Nothing seems to work for them. They have typically

experienced failure in school from an early age and maintain no hope for success in the future. They believe they have no reason to try to behave or to learn. They have severe learning or emotional problems and may come from troubled homes.

The trick of a good discipline plan is to control the 15 percent without alienating or overly regulating the 80 percent and without backing the 5 percent into a corner. Plans that are heavily punitive tend to control the 15 percent, thus giving the illusion that they are successful. However, the seeds are sown for the out-of-control students to explode or for some of the 80 percent to lose interest in learning. Teachers often feel trapped between their desire for consistency and the conflicting fear of coming down too hard on the rare rule violation of the naturally motivated student. Teachers also know that they need to give out-of-control students hope and a little "space" and to make school as positive an experience for them as possible.

### Questions to Pose Before You Choose

Whether or not discipline programs based on the punishment model work is the subject of a lively debate. However, whether or not they do, *working* is not enough. A reduction in the number of rule violations does not justify the resultant loss of dignity, dislike for school, desire "to finish rather than learn lessons,"<sup>1</sup> or reduction in developing responsibility on the part of students.

**Main Goal:** To teach students to make responsible choices.

**Principle:** To learn from the outcomes of decisions.

**When a student misbehaves (breaks a rule):**

**Consequences:**

1. Internal locus of control.
2. Done by student.
3. Logical or natural.

**Examples:**

1. Developing a plan describing how you will behave without breaking the rule when you are in a similar situation.
2. Practicing appropriate behavior in a private meeting with the teacher.

**Student learns:**

1. I cause my own outcomes.
2. I have more than one alternative behavior in any situation.
3. I have the power to choose the best alternative.

**Fig. 3. Responsibility Discipline Model**

Administrators in the market for a discipline program must carefully examine more than immediate results. Here are 10 questions to ask about any discipline program before implementing it in your school:

1. What happens to students who break rules? Punishments or consequences?

2. Is it realistically possible to reinforce this program consistently?

3. What do students learn as a result of the enforcement?

4. Are the principles of behavior as visible and as important as the rules?

5. Do students have a say in what happens to them?

6. Do teachers have discretion in implementing consequences?

7. Is adequate time given for professional development of teachers and administrators? Is the training completed in only a day or two? Is there continuous follow-up and administrative support?

8. Does the plan account for the special relationship between teaching and discipline style, or does it focus

exclusively on student behavior? Does it encourage teachers to examine their potential contributions to discipline problems?

9. Is the dignity of students preserved? Are students protected from embarrassment?

10. Is the program consistent with the stated goals of your school?

### **From the Heart of the Teacher toward Self-Discipline**

What most students learn about their behavior affects them as profoundly, if not more so, than what they learn about their subjects. When teachers devote as much energy and enthusiasm to behavior as they do to "content," and perceive misbehavior as an opportunity to affect students' lives positively, good things happen. Students recognize that teachers genuinely care, and teachers feel less like police. Cynicism is replaced by hope for teachers and students.

Effective discipline, then, does not come from the quick mastery of techniques nor the use of a packaged

method. Effective discipline comes from the heart and soul of the teacher. It comes from the belief that teaching students to take responsibility for their behavior is as much the job of the teacher as is teaching history or math. It comes from the belief that most students do the best they can in what many feel is an adverse environment. It comes from the belief that all students need hope. And it comes from the positive energy of the teacher. Only within the framework of the teacher's internal strength and the development of a caring classroom environment can a discipline plan yield responsible and self-disciplined school citizens. □

I. We wish to thank Raymond Wlodkowski of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee for sharing this insight.

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## **Let the Educator Beware: A Response to Curwin and Mendler**

Theories make for good reading, but Assertive Discipline is supported by research and gives teachers an effective strategy to use *now*.

I was asked to respond to Curwin and Mendler's article because I was told it criticized the Assertive Discipline approach to classroom management. In reading their article, however, I find it difficult to see exactly where they refer to Assertive Discipline and exactly what they object to. The majority of their points are vague and theoretical. Assertive Discipline, on the other hand, is based on experience and research. Therefore,

in responding to Curwin and Mendler, I will address those parts of their article to which I feel I can respond in a concrete manner. Opinions are easy to come by; facts are hard to dispute.

### **An Effective Classroom Management Strategy**

First, I would like to address the theme of the article. Curwin and Mendler seem to be warning educators about discipline programs that are

not only ineffective but can have negative effects. If they are referring to Assertive Discipline, I suggest they consider the following facts.

In 1983, Mandelbaum and her colleague at Bowling Green University examined the results of implementing the Assertive Discipline approach in a 3rd grade classroom in a midwestern metropolitan school district. They found that teachers were able to reduce inappropriate behavior as a re-

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