Responsive Classroom Approach to Discipline

Discipline as Learning

(Adapted excerpts from *Teaching Children to Care*, by Ruth Sidney Charney, 2002, Center for Responsive Schools)

The word *discipline* is derived from the Latin root *disciplina*, meaning "learning." It needs to be associated positively with acts and feats of learning rather than negatively with punishment. Teaching discipline requires two fundamental elements: empathy and structure. Empathy helps us to "know" children, to perceive their needs, to hear what they are trying to say. Structure allows us to set guidelines and provide necessary limits. Effective, caring discipline requires both empathy and structure.

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Time is golden. How we use our precious classroom time defines our priorities. Our schedules often become a battleground for conflicting interests. We go into teaching prepared to teach subjects such as reading, math, music, or art. When I have to stop a lesson to remind Cindy not to interrupt, to address the sarcastic remarks David made to Patty (who gave a wrong answer), or to quiet the voices of students not part of my group, I clench my teeth and mutter about "wasting time." Incorrectly, I start to feel that discipline is a time-waster, a symptom of problem students and poor teaching. If only I had the good class!

I have grown to appreciate the task of helping children learn to take better care of themselves, of each other, and of their classrooms. It's not a waste. It's probably the most enduring thing that I teach. We need to remember that academics and social behavior are profoundly intertwined. The best methods, the most carefully planned programs, the most intriguing lessons, the most exciting and delicious materials are useless without discipline and classroom management.

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We need to approach the issues of classroom management and discipline as much more than what to do when children break rules and misbehave. Rather than simply reacting to problems, we need to establish an ongoing curriculum in self-control, social participation, and human development. We need to accept the potential of children to learn these things and the potential of teachers to teach them.

This approach requires teaching proactively. Proactive teaching involves presenting and helping children practice appropriate attitudes and behaviors rather than constantly reacting to inappropriate ones. We need to focus systematic attention on our expectations of children and our methods of teaching those expectations.

Responsive Classroom Discipline Framework

COMPONENT	GOAL	PRACTICES	NOTES
Laying the foundation for positive behavior	To create and maintain a positive learning community and to teach self-regulation.	• Teaching routines • Establishing rules and expectations • Investing students in rules • Setting goals • Envisioning, reinforcing, and reminding language • Structured reflection	Self-regulation promotes positive relationships, a positive school climate, academic achievement, self-worth, and emotional well-being.
Preventing off-task behavior and mis-behavior	To teach students how to translate the rules and expectations into behavior, and to hold students to such behavior in a proactive, firm, fair, and consistent manner.	• Modeling • Role-playing • Structured reflection • Proximity • Visual cues • Proactive envisioning, reinforcing, and reminding language	High-quality teacher-student and student-student relationships contribute to a classroom and school climate in which students choose appropriate behavior out of respect for the teacher and one another.

Responding to off-task behavior and mis-behavior	To handle off-task behavior and misbehavior respectfully and help the student get back on track, repair any damage caused, and develop self-discipline so as to prevent similar problems in the future.	• Proximity
		• Visual cues
		• Reactive reminding and redirecting language
		• Logical consequences:
		  Loss of privilege
		  Break it, fix it
		  Time-out/Space and Time
			The teacher must communicate behavior expectations clearly and impose logical consequences with fairness and consistency, using a firm and caring demeanor, words, and tone.

Solving a chronic behavior problem	To understand the student's particular behavior problem and address it with modified or individualized discipline practices that get the student back on track for developing self-regulation; to help the student learn strategies for returning to positive behavior that work for them.	• Problem-solving conference • Individual written agreement • Goal setting • Modeling • Role-playing • Proactive and reactive envisioning, reminding, and redirecting language • Structured reflection	Many of the discipline practices used generally (such as modeling and checking in on progress toward goals) also work with students with chronic behavior problems. But the practices need to be used more frequently and systematically, with the involvement of parents and often other adults, such as behavior interventionists and guidance counselors.

The Steps of Interactive Modeling

1. Describe and explain what you will model.

2. Model while students notice.

3. Give students the opportunity to collaborate and practice.

4. Reinforce their practice with immediate feedback.

What Is Envisioning Language?

Envisioning language is the words teachers use to help students create positive mental images of themselves behaving and achieving in ways that connect to but go beyond their current reality. By painting these clear and engaging pictures of what's possible, envisioning language encourages students to put forth a greater effort and try harder to reach their goals. Through envisioning language, students are inspired and can see themselves achieving success in all areas of school.

4 Keys to Using Envisioning Language Effectively

➤ **Name positive identities for students**

➤ **Use concrete images and words so students can relate**

➤ **Try using metaphors**

➤ **Let students fill in the details**

Reinforcing Language: An Underused Tool

Reinforcing language is one of the most powerful tools available to educators—and one of the most underused. In the *Responsive Classroom* approach to teaching, this language gives students positive feedback that helps them reach toward higher levels of achievement, or what educator Peter Johnston calls the "leading edge"—the place at which a student reaches a bit beyond what she already knows or can do. Using specific reinforcing language to point out students' successes at their leading edge can be just what's needed to nudge them toward higher levels of mastery and success.

Characteristics of Reinforcing Language

Reinforcing language is most effective in the classroom when it has the following characteristics:

➤ Names concrete and specific behaviors

➤ Points out approximations toward mastery

➤ Emphasizes description over personal approval

➤ Reflects important goals and values

Reminding Language: Helping Students Remember Expectations

Few of us can get through a week or even a day without getting reminders or giving them; they help us stay organized and on track. Just like reminders in everyday life, reminders in school offer valuable support to students as they go about their busy days. But there's a crucial difference between everyday reminders and school reminders. With everyday reminders, we usually tell our listener what to remember—pick up milk and bread, go for an oil change, finish the laundry. By contrast, school reminding language prompts students to remember for themselves. Bonita wanders over to speak to a friend during independent work time. "Bonita, what do you need to be doing right now?" her teacher, Ms. Adamson, asks. Instead of naming the desired behavior, Ms. Adamson alerts Bonita to the need to remember expectations and then lets her choose an action based on meeting those expectations.

When we consistently use reminding language in this way, we communicate our assumption that students are competent learners with good intentions, even when their behavior is beginning to go off track. Reminding language helps students develop the autonomy and competence that lead to self-control and intrinsic motivation. They develop the habit of carefully attending to expectations because they know they're expected to remember them and behave accordingly.

Characteristics of Reminding Language

Reminding language can be used in a wide range of school situations, from transitions to whole-group discussions, from all-school meetings to class bus rides. Effective reminders:

➤ Are based on clearly established expectations

➤ May be framed as a question or a statement

➤ May be used proactively or reactively

➤ Are used when the teacher and student feel calm

➤ Are briefly stated

Redirecting Language: Giving Clear, Nonnegotiable Instructions

Some sixth graders are making collages as part of their science project. Macy waves her scapel in the air, the point coming perilously close to another student's face as she angrily explains why she won't share it. "Macy, put the scapel down, now," her teacher tells her firmly.

In another classroom, Ms. Addison's seventh graders are transitioning into the band room, which has a wonderful view. This morning, the snow is beginning to fall and the excited students expect to be released early. They mill around the room and take their time getting their instruments and going to their seats. "Everyone to your seats with your instruments in one minute," their teacher directs.

When students are doing something dangerous to themselves or others, are too emotional to remember the expectations and think reasonably about what they're supposed to be doing—or are otherwise too deeply invested in their off-track behavior to correct themselves—teachers need to redirect them with firm words. Redirecting language consists of statements or commands that are matter-of-fact, clear, and respectful. Skillfully used, redirecting language lets us provide our wise external controls to keep students safe and productive when their self-control is failing them.

Characteristics of Redirecting Language

As most teachers know, a lot can go wrong when we tell students what to do. It takes knowledge and practice to redirect them in ways that prompt them to act differently while still preserving their dignity and sense of belonging in the group.

Following are the characteristics of effective redirecting language:

> ➤ Is direct and specific
> ➤ Names the desired behavior
> ➤ Makes a statement instead of asking a question
> ➤ Is brief
> ➤ Sets firm limits (if necessary, action follows words)

Characteristics of Logical Consequences

Respectful

Notes:

Related

Notes:

Realistic

Notes:

Three Types of Logical Consequences

Loss of Privilege

Our fundamental expectation for students is that they'll act responsibly—they'll tell the truth, do their work, take care of property, get to class on time, and treat each other with respect, fairness, and friendliness. Examples of not meeting this basic expectation of acting responsibly include showing up late for class, not doing assignments, telling lies, acting or speaking in ways that disrespect others' rights or feelings, and mistreating or being careless with materials.

> **The 3 Types of Logical Consequences:**
> ➤ Loss of Privilege
> ➤ Break It, Fix It
> ➤ Space and Time

When those instances happen, it's time to reteach, remind, and when necessary remove the relevant privilege. When a hallway pass turns into a romp, you might stop giving that student a hallway pass for a few days until he's ready to try again.

When using this logical consequence, it's important to convey to students that the loss of the privilege is not intended to be a punishment. You can show this by your words and demeanor—and by restoring the privilege after you've given the student a reasonable amount of time to demonstrate the appropriate behavior with your guidance and support.

Following are several examples of situations in which loss of privilege would be an appropriate logical consequence, along with sample teacher language.

Individual Loss of Privilege

To play games on a tablet, a student says her work is done when it isn't.

"I must be able to believe what you say and trust you to follow routines for finished work. You'll have to show me your finished work every day this week."

A student leaves the room (with a pass) to go to the bathroom, fools around there, and doesn't return in a reasonable period of time.

"You're not using your pass for the bathroom properly. You'll get a bathroom pass with a set time limit on it for the next week."

A student doesn't do his part during a group assignment.

"When you don't do your part, you make it hard for your group to get its work done. You'll need to do an alternate assignment on your own to show your understanding. You can try working with the group next time."

Group Loss of Privilege

A group playing basketball excludes or intimidates certain classmates.

"The game is over. If you want to play tomorrow, you have to let me know how you plan to include everyone who wants to play."

The class misuses supplies.

"This class has been using so much paper that we're almost out of this month's supply. I've put out what I think is a reasonable quantity. When that's gone, there will be no more paper for the week."

Break It, Fix It

When students' mistakes result from simple carelessness, impulsivity, or forgetfulness, "break it, fix it" gives them the opportunity to take responsibility by fixing the damage they have caused. All that students need to know in the moment is information about what to do and the firm expectation that they'll do it. The teacher matter-of-factly offers simple directions that will get the spill cleaned up, the papers picked up, or the books put back on the desk. Discussion is not necessary.

"Break it, fix it" is simply and straightforwardly about fixing a problem—it is not about "payback," revenge, or any other form of punishment. If Frances drops her tray in the cafeteria, helping the custodian clean up the mess is a reasonable fix. Demanding that she help the custodian clean up the cafeteria for a week crosses the line into punishment.

When Is "Break It, Fix It" *Not* an Appropriate Logical Consequence?

Malik is angry because the teacher is talking to another student, so Malik dumps the homework tray over to get her attention. For the third time in a week, Kim does not want to do any art, so she defiantly folds her arms, glares at her teacher, and shouts "Make me!" When it's her turn to take notes, Lauren whispers to a neighbor that "Mallory will take notes if I pretend to forget." In situations like these, when students are upset, losing self-control, or willfully misbehaving, "fixing it" is not an appropriate logical consequence.

Instead, what these students need from their teacher is help in calming down and regaining self-control. What the other students in the class need is for their teacher to keep them safe by stopping the misbehavior and removing the misbehaving student from the situation. An immediate use of Space and Time or loss of privilege, therefore, would be a more appropriate consequence in each of these scenarios.

Once the student has calmed down, he or she will have the necessary mindset to listen to and interact productively with the teacher. What happens at that point depends on the student and the situation. The teacher might then direct the student to fix what the student broke, if anything, while he or she was out of control.

Dealing With Hurt Feelings

Managing a situation in which a student has done or said something that's hurt someone's feelings can be tricky. Immediately directing the student to "fix" the hurt feelings by apologizing may seem appropriate, but that strategy is neither realistic nor effective.

First, and perhaps most importantly, we need to realize that although we can direct students' actions and words, we cannot control their feelings or thoughts. Suppose the student who did the hurting simply does not feel sorry. If that's so, then the apology won't be genuine. Instead, it will feel wrong to the student making it and most likely won't make the hurt student feel any better.

The second reason that demanding immediate apologies is usually ineffective is that all the students involved in a hurtful incident are likely to be upset. Without some distance from the incident, the students probably won't be able to spare the emotional attention and energy needed to respond appropriately to their teacher or to each other.

As in all potentially unsafe situations, when a student is doing something that may hurt someone's feelings (using mean words, laughing unkindly, rolling their eyes or making other disdainful expressions), the immediate need is for the teacher to stop the hurtful behavior.

Once that's done with a quick and decisive intervention, all the students involved need a chance to calm down and regain their self-control. Only then can a teacher use "break it, fix it" to purposefully guide the students toward taking steps to soothe the hurt feelings and get back to being friends—or at least to working together peacefully and respectfully.

Following are situations in which "break it, fix it" would be appropriate, with some possible ways to respond in each situation.

An Individual "Break It, Fix It"

A student uses a negative tone when speaking to someone.

When students need help remembering to use an appropriate tone of voice, a teacher might say, "Use the rewind button and say it again."

For example, Hunter frequently uses demeaning language in PE: "Man, if I ran like Jason I'd go run with the girls." Immediately, his PE teacher says, "Rewind," an agreed-upon signal for fixing hurtful language. Hunter responds, "Oops, my bad, Jason. I shouldn't have said that."

Jonathan struggles again and again to solve a tough math problem. Overcome with frustration, he suddenly pushes all of his books and papers onto the floor.

"I can see you're having a tough time. After you've picked up your things, come over and let's see if I can help."

A Group "Break It, Fix It"

A group has been socializing rather than doing its work.

"Your work isn't done because you've been chatting," says the teacher. "It needs to be done today. You can do it during lunch or after school. Think a minute and then I'll ask each of you for your choice."

A group becomes argumentative while working on a map, getting very little done and disturbing the rest of the room.

The teacher names the problem and gives new directions: "This group is disturbing others and getting very little accomplished. Divide the work. Each of you will work alone to get this done by the end of the period."

The class is rude and unruly with a substitute.

Upon returning the next day, Ms. Ritchie discusses the problem with the class. "It sounds like some of you didn't take care of yourselves or the substitute teacher. We need a plan for what you'll do next time so that everyone has a positive and productive day."

The class comes up with a plan that includes listening to the guest teacher, doing their jobs, and following the rules about taking care of themselves, others, and their classroom and school.

Space and Time

Used in a consistent, calm, and nonpunitive way, Space and Time (or take a break) can be a valuable strategy for helping students develop self-control while preserving the smooth flow of the classroom.

Picture this scene:

> Fabio is reading a passage from a chapter in the social studies textbook. Everyone is listening with interest except Ashley, who fidgets and whispers in her neighbor's ear. Her neighbor is trying to concentrate but is obviously having a hard time doing so.

> "Take some Space and Time," the teacher whispers to Ashley.

Ashley gets up and moves to an open seat a few tables away, but still within earshot of the group. At first, she fidgets a bit more. Then she takes a few calming deep breaths and relaxes. A few moments later, Ashley returns to her seat and moves it slightly away from her neighbor. When the teacher asks an open-ended question about the passage, Ashley is able to focus and participate in the ensuing discussion.

Space and Time is a strategy used in many classrooms to help students learn and practice self-control. When practiced in a consistent and matter-of-fact way, it can be highly effective in maintaining clear limits for behavior while preserving the dignity of the individual and the smooth functioning of the group.

Space and Time allows students to make mistakes and recover from them within the guardrails of adult controls. Most importantly, it contributes to creating an environment that is safe, orderly, and conducive to learning.

Teaching Space and Time Procedures

Introduce Space and Time after rules have been established. This introduction should involve talking about Space and Time, modeling it, and letting students practice how to use it.

Modeling enables all students, regardless of how they've seen Space and Time used before, to see how it will be used in this classroom. "What did you notice about how I moved to a different chair?" the teacher might ask during the modeling.

Students might respond, "You walked," "You went straight there without stopping along the way to fool around with something," and so forth. Similarly, the teacher can ask students what they noticed about what she or he did in the chair and how she or he walked back.

Key behaviors to teach as part of Space and Time procedures:

➤ Going to a spot quickly without saying anything, making gestures, or stopping along the way

➤ Doing whatever it takes to refocus or regain self-control—as long as it's quiet and doesn't distract the class

➤ Coming back from Space and Time quietly and rejoining the group without disrupting the learning

➤ Helping a classmate who is in Space and Time, such as by leaving that person alone, going on with the classroom activity as usual, and quietly welcoming the classmate back when she or he returns

Guidelines for Using Space and Time

Following are general guidelines for how to introduce and use Space and Time effectively. These guidelines reflect how this strategy is used in the *Responsive Classroom* approach to middle school teaching.

Designate a Few Options

It's usually most effective to designate a few specific options that students can use to regain self-control. For example, they can move to an empty desk or another table, or stand up to stretch in the back of the room.

For young adolescents, who are sensitive to peer perceptions, taking some Space and Time could turn into a power struggle if they feel exposed or embarrassed in front of their classmates. It's important, therefore, that teachers direct students to take Space and Time in as private a way as possible. This gives students the separation they need to refocus while enabling them to keep track of what's going on in the classroom so they can join in the work when they come back. Also, for safety reasons, any designated Space and Time area needs to be visible to the teacher from anywhere in the room.

Explain the Purpose to Students

Because many students may have experienced punitive uses of time-out or other similar practices in the past, it's important to explain clearly that the purpose of taking Space and Time in this classroom is to give them a chance to calm down and regain self-control, not to punish them. It's also important to tell students that after they've gathered themselves, they'll be welcomed back into the group.

To further distance Space and Time from possible negative connotations, consider inviting students to help decide on a name such as "take a break" or "chill time."

Use Space and Time for Small Disturbances, Before a Situation Gets Worse

Students frequently give signals when they're about to lose control—they fidget, make negative remarks, pick and poke, or whisper to a friend while a classmate is speaking. Direct students to take Space and Time when you notice these first signs, rather than waiting until small disturbances have escalated into major disruptions.

Using Space and Time early means a student will have an easier time pulling him- or herself back together and calmly rejoining the group. It also helps preserve the student's relationships with classmates and allows the teacher to remain empathetic toward the student. It can be tough, for example, to feel empathy when a student is being verbally abusive or hitting a classmate.

Keep Space and Time Brief and Clarify Who Decides When It's Over

Space and Time is generally brief in duration, though that depends greatly on the individual student's ability to regain control and return to the group. Although the ultimate goal is for students to be able to decide for themselves when they're ready to return, the teacher holds on to this decision until students show that they can responsibly decide how much time they need.

Some teachers choose from the start to let the student decide when to return. If, however, the student comes back before having regained control or lingers in Space and Time longer than necessary, the teacher takes over this decision-making. Whatever the case, make it clear to students who will decide when they can rejoin the group, and use a simple signal, such as a nod or hand gesture, to tell them it's time to return.

Use a Calm Voice and Few Words

When telling a student to take some Space and Time, the fewer words used, the better. A simple whisper to "Take some Space and Time," a visual signal such as pointing to a spot, or handing the student a card is often enough. Remember to do this as privately as you can. An important purpose of Space and Time is that it enables the work of the group to continue when a student is being disruptive or distracting. Lengthy explanations or negotiations with the student will only disrupt the group further. Moreover, the student is usually not in a frame of mind to discuss the situation reasonably. Using a calm voice further minimizes disruption to the group. It also avoids drawing attention to the student.

When introducing Space and Time, explain that although you won't stop to discuss your reasons for telling a student to take some Space and Time in the moment, you'll always be willing to talk about the situation later. A check-in later in the period might help the student sort out feelings, air any misunderstandings, and, if necessary, strategize about how to avoid the same problem in the future. It can also help to reestablish the rapport between teacher and student.

Use Space and Time Democratically

It's important for students to see that Space and Time is used for everyone, not just the same two or three students, and that it's used for the subtle acting out, not just the obvious misbehaviors. Indeed, at one point or another almost all students, even the "model" ones, forget the rules or lose their cool.

Some students will struggle more with self-control than others and therefore use Space and Time more often. But even those who struggle only rarely or in subtle ways need a strategy for collecting themselves. Using Space and Time for these students shows them and the class that anyone can lose self-control—and that anyone can regain it.

Remember That Space and Time Is Not a Cure-All

It's important to remember the following caveats:

➤ Although Space and Time is a great strategy for helping students regain self-control, we shouldn't expect it to "fix" students' challenging behaviors.

➤ We should expect to keep using Space and Time throughout the year because even when a classroom is running smoothly, students will still sometimes lose self-control and need a break to settle themselves.

➤ Space and Time is just one of many strategies we can use to help students learn and grow in their capacity to follow rules and exhibit positive behaviors.