

Control Without Coercion

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Trevor is a sixth grader with a reputation for causing trouble. One day at school he was caught throwing paper wads in Mr. Lee's class, and he made disruptive comments in Ms. Barton's class. Both teachers confronted Trevor, yet each saw a different response.¹

Mr. Lee, the sixth grade teacher, reminded Trevor about the rules for disruptive behavior and warned that next time there would be a punishment. Trevor looked down and said nothing. For the rest of the class period he behaved—while Mr. Lee was watching. But whenever the teacher turned his back, Trevor continued to act up, whispering to his neighbor and throwing more paper wads. At one point he pulled a face at the teacher's back, and several students giggled. Suspecting Trevor was the culprit yet not having any proof, Mr. Lee just glared at the boy, who looked innocently back.

Ms. Barton approached Trevor differently in her class. Privately, in a nonthreatening manner, she asked him if anything was wrong. She reminded Trevor about the class rules and told him how difficult it was for her to do her job when students disrupted. She thanked him for his positive participation in past days and asked him if he could help her by continuing on that path instead. Trevor agreed to try, and for the rest of the class he raised his hand often. At one point when he became distracted and talked to his neighbor, Ms. Barton calmly began walking toward him. Trevor remembered his agreement and immediately became involved in the lesson again.

Why did two teachers see almost opposite reactions in the same student? Of course, each approached him differently, but was the style of confronting the only factor? Probably not. For if Ms. Barton did not balance her kind reprimand with a presence of authority in her classroom, a disruptive student would likely ignore or laugh at her gentle reprimand. How does a teacher discipline without using threats and get better results than teachers who rely strictly on punishment?

While the manner of discipline has much to do with encouraging students to change, a teacher's whole management style provides the context for nonthreatening discipline to work. Mr. Lee and Ms. Barton differ from each other in four key areas: how they view children, how they relate to children, how they teach children, and how they discipline children.

Viewing children. Mr. Lee believes that most children must be coerced to learn or obey. Punishments deter students from wrong, and certain rewards, such as praise or good grades, encourage appropriate behavior. Unfortunately, not all of Mr. Lee's students value high marks, and some, like Trevor, receive more immediate reinforcement from

their peers when they cause disruptions. Students who do fear punishment are careful to obey only when Mr. Lee is watching.

Ms. Barton believes that children act on their perceptions, their feelings, and their beliefs. She understands that words and actions flow out of the heart. Therefore, her management style focuses on guiding students to see what is right and to love the good. Ms. Barton knows that some students can feel manipulated by praise so she is careful how she uses it. When they work hard she thanks them, and she offers children very specific feedback about their work. The students appreciate her trust in them, and they put forth their best efforts in her class.²

Relating to children. Mr. Lee fears that befriending the students would compromise his authority so he remains somewhat distant. Neither does Mr. Lee take time to chat with the children or to get involved in their lives. An efficient worker, he tries to spend recess times correcting or preparing for class. Unfortunately, dealing with discipline problems consumes much of his break time.

Ms. Barton has learned that children listen to her better when she takes the time to cultivate positive relationships with them. She tries to visit with her students outside of class, and she demonstrates sincere interest in their lives. Of course, she intervenes when children do wrong, but usually a brief conversation suffices because of the bond that exists between the children and herself. Because her students like her, they don't want to disappoint her.

Teaching children. Mr. Lee follows the textbook closely in his lessons and units. He lectures most class periods, giving notes off the overhead. Assignments typically involve reading the chapter and answering the questions at the end. There is little time for activities because the book must be covered before the semester ends. Students cram for tests and then quickly forget what they have learned. Their apparent boredom frustrates Mr. Lee. He blames it on the influence of television.

Ms. Barton realizes that an irrelevant curriculum causes apathy among students and usually results in management challenges. She attempts to design units that are more student-centered. Before teaching a new concept she asks herself why this concept is so important for her students to know. What choices are they presently making in their lives that might be affected by learning this material?³ Using these questions as a starting point, she prepares lessons that will connect in as many ways as possible to what her students know, feel, and believe. Ms. Barton also understands that children are created differently and possess different learning styles. She employs a wide variety of teaching strategies to accommodate uniqueness among students. The learning is meaningful, and children rarely seem bored in her class.

Disciplining children. For Mr. Lee, discipline serves two purposes: to deter students from misbehavior and to make students "pay" for wrongs committed. In carrying out discipline Mr. Lee does little to encourage appropriate behavior. Some students aren't fazed by his threats and are a real thorn in his side because their parents don't seem to care either.

Ms. Barton sees herself as a guide in all of her teaching, but especially in her discipline. For her, the purpose of discipline is to get the students back on track.⁴ She takes the time to help erring children understand the natural consequences of their actions, realizing that using discipline as a teaching opportunity accomplishes much more in the long term than just levying punishments. Though students are held accountable for their behavior, Ms. Barton is careful not to act or talk in ways that would damage their relationship. Finally, she knows that she cannot guide effectively if she becomes upset in every discipline situation. Ms. Barton has trained herself to relax and remain calm even when she feels angry, letting her negative emotions show only when she believes it is appropriate. Instead of yelling or glaring, she combines calmness with physical proximity to nip most small problems in the bud. This blend asserts authority so subtly that most bystanders don't even realize discipline is taking place.⁵

Conclusion. Early on in my teaching I was Mr. Lee. His assumptions about children, teaching, and discipline were my assumptions. And his frustrations were also my frustrations. Over the years, through research and good mentors, I have slowly become Ms. Barton in the way I manage and discipline. This transformation has led to more enjoyable and productive teaching and learning.

Does classroom control without coercion sound far-fetched? If a teacher's management style ignores the need for positive relationships and meaningful learning, then discipline that guides rather than threats is a pipe dream. A teacher's genuine concern about students and awareness of their needs provides the context for discipline that is gentle, discipline that yields sincere changes in students.

¹ Mr. Lee, Ms. Barton and Trevor are fictional characters.

² Alfie Kohn, in his book *Punished by Rewards*, attacks the use of incentives and threats in management. Citing dozens of studies, he systematically explains why manipulative strategies stifle interest in learning (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

³ John Van Dyk, in his book *The Craft of Christian Teaching*, reminds teachers that we invite management problems if our lessons are not meaningful (Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt Press, 2000).

⁴ See *Nurturing Children in the Lord* by Jack Fennema (Phillipburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1977). Fennema contrasts "biblical chastening" with punishment. Chastening focuses on the future and seeks to redirect the child. Punishment concentrates on the past and payment for wrongs committed.

⁵ See *Positive Classroom Discipline* by Frederick H. Jones (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987). Jones offers practical suggestions for asserting authority while at the same time protecting one's relationship with the student. I advise caution, however. Some of his ideas tend to be more coercive.