

# Discipline with Dignity: How to Build Responsibility, Relationships, and Respect in Your Classroom, 4th Edition

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## Introduction: What Is Discipline with Dignity?

When the first edition of *Discipline with Dignity* was published in the 1980s, the United States was in the mood for a strong stand on law and order. Years earlier, protests against the lack of civil rights for minorities and the unequal treatment of women had begun wholesale questioning of and frequent challenges to the status quo. Many people began to view the standards and norms that had defined our institutions for generations as flawed, unfair, and discriminatory.

Schools were not exempt from challenges to the country's values, mores, and practices. Educators were increasingly faced with students who did not behave and parents who were absent, pre-occupied, or inclined to side with their children. This situation led to teacher frustration along with demands for more obedience from students and harsher penalties for those who broke the rules. Schools claimed it was easier and fairer to students who worked hard to rid classrooms of students who proved they didn't belong. Programs developed to put control back in the hands of teachers too often relied on rewards and punishments and reduced choices, and they often led to the removal of students who refused to comply. Minorities were affected—and punished—the most. Standardized tests were beginning to be used, not just to judge students but to judge teachers and schools as well. Although these programs seldom work as intended, many schools continue to use them.

Schools became a two-tiered system, with students who followed the rules being rewarded and those who didn't being punished. What educators even now sometimes forget is that removing troublemakers from school does not eliminate them from life. Young adults who don't graduate from high school cost our society a fortune in expenses related to prison, welfare, and crime. Crime is one job that accepts anyone, regardless of educational status.

We created Discipline with Dignity—an approach that supports various interventions, strategies, and constructs intended to help children make better choices and to make life better for teachers—to offer educators a different vision. When we began, improving student behavior by building relationships was a new concept. Today this approach is much more common, but traditional humiliation, detention, in-school suspension, and suspension remain options in almost all schools we visit; most continue with honor roll and awards assemblies based solely on grade point average. At the time, we believed that rewards and punishments created winners and losers and did not bring out the best in all students. We realized that

many troubled students would not accept simply doing as they were told and would be more likely to comply if they were included in the decisions that affect their lives. We advocated for involving them in developing school and classroom rules and consequences rather than imposing rewards and punishments upon them.

We saw that teachers were no longer being effective using simple obedience methods; we knew that to influence change, teachers needed to earn the trust of their students. We noticed that for some older students, acting out was a choice, done out of disdain for individual teachers. We watched kids behave perfectly for one teacher and completely disrupt the classroom for a different teacher the next period. We advocated for schools to focus more on creating responsible citizens who could think and decide for themselves. We believed humiliating people to gain compliance only sprouted more anger and, ultimately, less compliance. Our vision led to appropriate behavior in the presence and *absence* of authority.

We discovered how much teacher and student stress was a major factor contributing to student misbehavior, so we included what are now called "mindfulness" activities for teachers and students to engage in when upset. We wanted to meet the needs of every student, and although we knew that goal might not always be possible, we wanted every teacher to understand and have strategies to address the unfulfilled needs that lead to inappropriate behavior. We watched and continue to watch teachers have the most success with challenging students by listening closely and then listening more. They ask questions and follow-up questions when things don't seem right. They get to know their students, and they let students get to know them. They relentlessly teach and practice alternative actions students can take when feeling the sadness, anger, frustration, and annoyance that are often at the root of a behavior problem. They are tougher at not giving up than some students are at pushing them away.

Discipline with Dignity is actually an aspirational vision of what schools ought to be. It is highly structured, yet flexible. We designed our approach to help every educator, regardless of philosophy, strengths, and style. Our goal is to produce more responsible students and an easier, more comfortable life for teachers. Since the publication of the first edition, we continue to learn new and improved ways to positively influence student behavior in a constantly changing world. We have discovered many things about our vision in the last 30 years. The most important is that relationships between teachers and students matter more than rules and consequences for changing behavior. Real change occurs more from informal interventions than from a formal process, and in this edition, we emphasize what those interventions are and how to use them. We know that every child can succeed and will behave when the emphasis is more on effort than achievement. After all, no student can do more than try to do his best. There has always been a strong link between discipline and motivation, but most educators need to know specific ways to awaken motivation in today's "difficult" students without resorting to rewards and punishments.