

Managing Student Behavior: Self-Esteem vs. Self-Control

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to challenge the commonly held belief that classroom disciplinary problems are more often than not due to issues of low self-esteem in students. The reality is that building self-esteem has led to a generation of narcissists that believe the world revolves around them. This paper explores some of the negative consequences of self-esteem and suggests that building the students ability to use self-control is a more effective approach to classroom management. And finally this paper suggests various techniques to instill self-control in students.

For decades psychologists have viewed self-esteem as the defining trait that would fix all that is wrong with society. Among other things, it was assumed that having high self-esteem would lead to better health, better marriages, and a greater chance of success in life (Baumeister, 2005). The idea of boosting children's self-esteem is a natural extension of this notion. Many schools have instituted programs that are designed to develop students' sense of self-worth. As Baumeister points out, students are encouraged to create collages and lists that celebrate how wonderful they are. Trophies are given to every child in Little League and many athletic programs in elementary schools don't keep score so as not to hurt anyone's feelings.

While these programs are grounded in the earliest studies of self-esteem and academic achievement, Baumeister believes that they ultimately do more harm than good. According to Baumeister (2005), "These studies show not only that self-esteem fails to accomplish what we had hoped, but also that it can backfire and contribute to some of the very problems it was thought to thwart" (p. 36). Baumeister goes on to say; "Self-loving brutes run the gamut from playground bullies, to violent gang members, to wife beaters, to warmongering tyrants like Hitler and Saddam Hussein" (p.38).

According to the documentary *Waiting for Superman* (Birtel & Guggenheim, 2010), the U.S. ranked 25th in math among 30 developed countries and 21st in science, but American children ranked first in confidence. This ranking reflects the approach many American parents take when raising their children. Parents are valuing self-esteem and confidence over any real measure of achievement.

As Samantha Cleaver, a noted public school teacher in Washington, D.C., and author of the article "Too Much of a Good Thing?"(2007) stated:

For decades our culture has concentrated on teaching self-esteem first, learning second. In the late 1980s, a California government task force found no connection between low self-esteem and societal ills, such as drug use, teen pregnancy, and school underachievement. Still, California forged ahead with a self-esteem education plan. Today, raising children's self-esteem continues to be a primary goal in the classroom, and a goal of parents at home. Downplaying grades, praising children for minimal effort, or using neutral-colored green or purple pens to comment on written work seems harmless enough, but we may be taking away the sense of satisfaction and pride that comes from genuine achievement (p. 31).

Too much praise can be dangerous if it leads students to focus on how praise makes them feel rather than on learning new information (Cleaver, 2007).

This paper will explore the origins of the commonly held belief that low self-esteem is one of the main causes of low achievement and disciplinary problems in the classroom today. It will also describe what many educators now believe are the true causes of these problems and why teaching self-control is a more effective approach for classroom management. Finally, this paper will describe effective methods for coping with disciplinary problems in the classroom, many of which favor self-control over self-esteem.

Over the years there has been much debate regarding the relationship between self-esteem and overall performance by children in the classroom. A positive connection would seem logical—confident children should achieve more and cause less disciplinary problems. However, considerable research brings into question whether such a connection actually exists (Kohn, 1994).

Indeed, many experts argue the opposite may be true: that rather than raising healthy, happy, and high achieving students, we are cultivating a generation of narcissists. “Our old notions of self-esteem, like blood-letting and alchemy, are passé and parents need to send the concept to the trash heap of all things antiquated and useless,” Aaron Cooper, Ph.D., co-author of *I Just Want My Kids to be Happy! Why You Shouldn't Say It, Why You Shouldn't Think It, What You Should Embrace Instead* told Hannah Boyd in an article on Education.com. As Boyd noted, researchers Seligman and Straub have also found that constant praise is turning kids cynical and unmotivated.

While focusing on the self-esteem of children does not necessarily lead to improved performance and higher achievement, low self-esteem can be problematic in other ways. Students with self-esteem issues can have a detrimental effect on the entire learning environment by producing unrest in the classroom, encouraging the teacher to withdraw from his or her students and increasing frustration for all involved. These students tend to ask fewer questions which leads the teacher to potentially lower their expectations which only limits the students' opportunities to learn. In addition, their peers may avoid these students, which forces them to attach themselves to more undesirable peer groups. (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl, 1993).

To address behavioral problems and encourage high achievement, some psychologists believe it is better to reward children for good behavior and academic accomplishments and withhold rewards from students who fail to meet expectations. Despite the popularity of this approach with educators and parents, Alfie Kohn has pointed out that studies have found that such behavior modification programs rarely result in lasting changes in attitudes and behavior. When the rewards are discontinued, people usually return to the way they acted before the program began. As Kohn stated, “More disturbingly, researchers have recently discovered that children whose parents make frequent use of rewards for good behavior tend to be less generous than their peers” (Kohn, 1994). This ‘carrot-and-stick’ approach of rewarding students for compliance can lower students’ expectations of themselves.

As Kohn (1994) stated:

Rewards are no more helpful at enhancing achievement than they are at fostering good values. At least two-dozen studies have shown that people expecting to receive a reward for completing a task (or for doing it successfully) simply do not perform as well as those who expect nothing (p. 2).

Kohn believes that extrinsic motivators do not alter behavior, at least not in a constructive way because children become conditioned to act responsibly when a treat is involved and stop making an effort when no reward is at stake (Kohn, 1994).

Intrinsic motivators may be more important, but techniques for fostering them must be carefully selected. For example, Marzano, Pickering and Pollock pointed out that rewarding the student for completing a simple task does not necessarily enhance intrinsic motivation but may in fact decrease it (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock, 2001, p. 57). If the long-term goal is intrinsic motivation rather than the short-term reward, it is critical to focus on increasing the student’s internal motivation to not only learn, but also to value what is being taught and exhibit proper classroom behavior that ultimately benefits everyone.

In many classrooms, the focus has not been on fostering internal motivation in students, but rather gaining control of the classroom through stricter and stricter means of discipline. According to Gene Van Tassel in his article “Classroom Management” (2008), this is at times carried to such an extent that discipline and control are considered to be one in the same. The danger of this approach is that the day to day maintenance of control can shift the focus away from learning to the detriment of students.

According to the National Association of School Psychologists, self-control is a critical skill to have—not just for children but for also for adults. Simply stated, self-control refers to having power or control over one’s own actions rather than over others.

To do so, children must make choices. Children who avoid making choices—or worse, allow other children, parents, teachers, or adults to make choices for them—are not learning self-control because they are not taking responsibility for the consequences of their behavior. Teaching student's self-control at an early age will also help them feel better about the choices that they do make (NASP, 2002).

Despite the importance of self-control, many students do not always know how to manage their behavior. According to Van Tassel, this lack of self-control is frustrating for parents and for children and it may be one of the reasons that suicide rates have risen so dramatically in recent years. In his book *Self-Regulation: The Key to Motivating At-Risk Children*(1989), Clifford Edwards stated, "Suicides have increased 300 percent in the past thirty years, while suicide attempts have risen 350 percent to 700 percent" (p. 59).

Although the research on self-control is newer, the evidence suggests self-control may be more effective than self-esteem for boosting achievement. Baumeister cited research from Shoda, Miscel & Peake demonstrating that a four-year-old child's self-control predicts his school achievement, social skills, and popularity into early adulthood.

As Baumeister stated (2005):

People with lots of self-control have better mental health and make better friends and lovers. Bosses with high self-control are rated by their subordinates as fairer as and better than bosses with lower scores. Conversely, low self-control is a major predictor – some say the single most important cause – of criminality, and the related tendencies to violate norms and break rules. Moreover, interventions that boost self-control have shown remarkable and sweeping benefits. For example, teaching people self-discipline in money management not only improves their cash flow and savings rate, but also leads them to exercise more, to smoke and drink less, and to keep a tidier house. Self-control seems to be a core strength that can be increased to make the person more successful across many domains. (p. 41).

According to William Ayres in his book, *To Teach* (2001), "In a democracy there must be discussion, deliberation, dialogue. And while in every dialogue there are mistakes, misperception, struggle, and emotion, it is the disequilibrium of dialogue that leads to exploration, discovery, and change" (p.138). Mr. Ayres notes the importance of a classroom where the student's have a voice. It may not always be perfect but as he stated, this type of classroom, "...leads to exploration, discovery and change."

In his article "*Choices for Children Why and How to Let Students Decide*," Alfie Kohn suggested teaching self-control is more effective when the students themselves have a voice in their own learning experience. Mr. Kohn believes that a more democratic approach is the more effective way to instill self-control in the classroom. He went on to say that enforcing too much control ultimately has a negative effect on the students and their willingness to learn. Later in the same article, he talked about self-control in broader terms, saying that people are generally happier if they feel they have control over a situation and this control—whether real or imagined—will affect the outcome of the task they are attempting to accomplish.

Kohn gives the example of the teacher who runs his or her classroom like a dictatorship, one where the students have little or no voice in the management of the classroom environment. He says the moment this teacher leaves the room the children will "erupt" and act out, much in the same way a child raised by parents who emphasize strict discipline are more likely to act out when unsupervised. He believes that it is in classrooms and in families where participation is encouraged that children have the best chance of learning to control themselves and are more likely to maintain a proper level of self-control when an authority figure is not present(Kohn,1993).

As the National Association of School Psychologists noted:

In order to have positive experiences at home, in school, and in the community, children need to learn skills to appropriately handle their feelings associated with wanting something that they cannot have. These skills will increase children's self-control and tolerance of others. In order for children to gain control of their behavior when they are experiencing strong feelings, they must know how to identify their feelings (p.2).

Techniques for making children aware of their feelings include helping them identify the link between feelings and behavior. Doing this helps them see how feelings alter the choices they make and that these efforts can also enhance a child's sense of self-control (NASP, 2002).

Those who try to increase self-control in children tend to focus on emotions like anger, based on the belief that this will improve their ability to cope with life and get along with others. Conflict is a part of life and demonstrating an ability to control oneself during moments of conflict in a mature and sensitive manner is a valuable skill to possess.

Some research has demonstrated the impact of such training. According to a study by University of Rochester Medical Center, children who were taught the skills to monitor and control their anger, as well as other emotions, not only improved their classroom behavior, but also had significantly fewer school disciplinary referrals and suspensions. In the study, students used a "feelings thermometer" to depict the intensity of their emotions. They also learned techniques to monitor their feeling and modify them before they reach a state where they felt they had no control. Among the strategies they used were: taking a deep breath, stepping back from emotionally charged situations, and using visual imagery to control their reaction to hurtful words (Science Daily, March 7, 2010).

According to Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl (1993), a teacher's classroom management style and organization can also have an effect on disorderly behavior, which occurs more frequently in the absence of clearly defined classroom activities. Defined activities help structure the student's behavior. Subject matter also makes a difference. For example, lessons with more rigid routines like math or spelling tend to lead to less disruptive behavior, while more loosely planned exercises such as group discussions and independent work time lead to more disruptive behavior. The type of relationship the teacher has with the student also has an effect behavior in the classroom. If the students don't feel like they are being taken seriously or have a voice, they are more likely to act out. A well-ordered classroom is defined as having a focus on appropriate student behavior, clear expectations of students, consistent communication about the rules, formal discipline codes, and clear classroom management plans, and a teacher who demonstrates concern for students as individuals.

Teachers also need to be specific when making requests of students because misbehavior may simply be an issue of miscommunication. In his book *Teach Like a Champion* (2010), Doug Lemov recommended avoiding remarks such as "Don't get distracted," "Stop fooling around," and "That behavior was inappropriate," because they are vague, unclear, and ineffective. They also force students to guess what it is you want them to do. Lemov stated, "Directions need to be concrete, specific, sequential and observable" (p. 179). The more specific your instruction, the greater the chance students will comply and utilize self-control in the future. He went on to say, "Ignoring misbehavior is the most invasive form of intervention because it becomes more likely that the behavior will persist and continue" (p. 175).

Lemov encourages teachers to address misbehavior when it first appears because waiting indicates to the rest of the class that some negative behaviors are acceptable. He also stressed the importance remaining unemotional and acting with a ready-made scale of consequences for specific behavioral problems. He goes on to say that addressing negative behaviors by praising the students who are behaving properly can be problematic (p. 175). This can send mixed messages and create a sense of resentment between students within the classroom.

In conclusion, the teacher is a facilitator of learning. As a facilitator, the teacher's main goal is to create an environment that is conducive to learning. With that in mind the teacher must clearly define routines, expectations and especially foster student understanding of how choices they make impact the academic environment. The teacher then is responsible for insuring that behaviors, which are not beneficial to learning, are modified and adjusted until they are the best fit for the learning environment the teacher has created. Students need to have a clear understanding of which behaviors are advantageous to the learning environment and which ones are not. However, students don't always come into the classroom with the ability to make the best choices. These are skills that sometimes need to be taught so that when the time comes the student makes the best behavioral choice. We want our students to make the best choices, not because they fear the consequences, but because they recognize that right choice insures an optimal learning environment.

The goal of any classroom management system is to help the students understand that good choices result in constructive outcomes, not just for themselves but for everyone involved. The issue then is encouraging self-control and not simply building self-esteem. That is not to diminish the importance of self-esteem, it is just to say that a little goes a long way and we need to be careful regarding how and when it is administered. Most people try to avoid conflict in their everyday lives but perhaps this is not the answer. We all strive for peaceful existence, in the classroom, with our families and in our day-to-day relationships.

Yet we avoid conflict due to the tension it carries. But the fact is, conflict is a part of life and demonstrating an ability to control oneself during moments of conflict is a sign of maturity. It is something children need to know and be able to utilize during situations that may not always be going their way. Simply punishing improper behavior and rewarding proper behavior compels students to act in a way that allows them to receive the promised reward rather than modifying their behavior in any lasting manner - the 'Carrot and Stick' approach as Alfie Kohn referred to it. In addition, children may become addicted to the feeling that high praise creates. Rather than simply telling student's what is right and wrong, the goal needs to be teaching children the proper way to control their emotions and to use self-control. So that when the time comes, the students themselves should have the skills in place to make the best choice to ensure the best outcome for all involved.

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