

Rudolf Dreikurs: Discipline through Democratic Teaching



On the heels of the influential books by Jacob Kounin and Haim Ginott there appeared yet another great contribution to discipline, one by psychiatrist Rudolf Dreikurs that emphasized seeking out and dealing with underlying causes of misbehavior. Dreikurs formulated strategies for helping students acquire self-discipline based on understanding of its social value. Dreikurs taught that self-discipline could best be achieved within the context of a democratic classroom.

Dreikurs (1897–1972) was born in Vienna, Austria. After receiving his medical degree from the University of Austria, he entered into a long association with the renowned Austrian psychiatrist Alfred Adler, with whom he worked in family and child counseling. Dreikurs immigrated to the United States in 1937 and eventually became director of the Alfred Adler Institute in Chicago. He also served as professor of psychiatry at the Chicago Medical School. In keeping with his interest in child and family counseling, he turned his attention to misbehavior and discipline in school classrooms.

Dreikurs's Principal Teachings

Discipline at its best is seen in student self-control, based on social interest. Self-controlled students are able to show initiative, make reasonable decisions, and assume responsibility in ways that benefit themselves and others, thus improving the school experience for all concerned. Good discipline occurs best in a democratic classroom, one in which teacher and students work together to make decisions about how the class will function. Good discipline cannot occur in autocratic or permissive classrooms. In autocratic classrooms, the teacher makes all decisions and imposes them on students, leaving no opportunity for student initiative and responsibility. In permissive classrooms, the teacher fails to require that students comply with rules, conduct themselves humanely, or deal with the consequences for their misbehavior.

Almost all students have a primary and compelling desire to feel they are a valued member of the class and that they belong. This sense of belonging is the genuine goal of most school behavior. Students sense belonging when the teacher and others give them attention and respect, involve them in activities, and do not mistreat them. When students are unable to gain a sense of belonging in the class, they often turn to the mistaken goals of attention-seeking, power seeking, revenge seeking, and inadequacy. When seeking attention, students talk out, show off, interrupt others, and demand teacher attention. When seeking power, they drag their heels, make comments under their breath, and sometimes try to show that the teacher can't make them do anything. When seeking revenge, they try to get back at the teacher and other students by lying, subverting class activities, and maliciously disrupting the class. When displaying inadequacy, they withdraw from class activities and make no effort to learn.

Teachers should learn how to identify mistaken goals and deal with them. When teachers see evidence that students are pursuing mistaken goals, they should point out the

fact by identifying the mistaken goal and discussing the faulty logic involved. They should do this in a friendly, nonthreatening manner. Dreikurs suggests calmly asking, "Do you need me to pay more attention to you?" or "Could it be that you want to show that I can't make you do the assignment?"

Rules for governing class behavior should be formulated jointly by teacher and students. **Logical consequences** for compliance or violation should be associated with those rules. Good behavior, shown in following the rules, brings pleasant consequences, such as enjoyment of learning and associating positively with others. Misbehavior brings unpleasant consequences, such as having to complete work at home or being excluded from normal class activities.

Punishment should never be used in the classroom. Punishment is a way for teachers to get back at students and show who's boss. It usually humiliates the student and has additional undesirable effects. It should therefore be replaced with logical consequences that have been agreed to by the class.

Review of Dreikurs's Contributions

Dreikurs contributed several valuable concepts and strategies, many of which are evident in today's most popular systems of discipline. He called self-discipline **true discipline**, and was the first to base his discipline scheme on the premise of **social interest**, that is, on students' seeing that their personal well-being is closely associated with what is good for the group. He was among the first to clarify how democratic teachers and democratic classrooms promote sound discipline. He was the first to pinpoint a prime goal (that of belonging) as an underlying motivator of student behavior, and to identify the mistaken goals of attention, power, revenge, and inadequacy that students turn to when unable to achieve the primary goal of belonging. He urged teachers to involve students jointly in formulating rules of class behavior and link those rules with logical consequences that occur as students comply with, or violate, the class rules.

Dreikurs also provided a number of more specific suggestions concerning how teachers should interact with students. He said teachers should never use punishment and should avoid using praise, which he felt made students dependent on teacher reactions. Instead of praise, Dreikurs would have teachers use **encouragement**. Praise, by its nature, is directed at the character of the student. Encouragement, by its nature, is directed at what the student does or can do. Instead of saying "You can certainly play the piano well," an enlightened teacher would say, "I notice a great deal of improvement," or "I can see you enjoy playing very much." Dreikurs gave considerable attention to how teachers should speak and relate with students. He made the following suggestions (Dreikurs and Cassel, 1972, pp. 51–54):

- Always speak in positive terms; never be negative.
- Encourage students to strive for improvement, not perfection.
- Emphasize student strengths while minimizing weaknesses.
- Help students learn from mistakes, which are valuable parts of the learning process.
- Encourage independence and the assumption of responsibility.

- Show faith in students; offer them help in overcoming obstacles.
- Encourage students to help each other.
- Show pride in students' work; display it and share it with others.
- Be optimistic and enthusiastic—a positive outlook is contagious.
- Use encouraging remarks, such as, "You have improved." "Can I help you?" "What did you learn from that mistake?"

Because Dreikurs contributed so much to discipline, it might seem strange that teachers did not adopt his approach wholeheartedly. Teachers like his ideas, but have found his system a bit daunting, too unwieldy to be implemented easily. They had trouble seeing the interconnections among democracy, prime motive, mistaken goals, social interest, and logical consequences. But most of all, they found it lacking in the ingredient they most wanted, namely, what do you do to put an immediate stop to student disruptions, aggression, and defiance?

Lee and Marlene Canter: Discipline through Assertive Tactics



In 1976, Lee Canter founded Canter & Associates. Their first product was a book titled *Assertive Discipline: A Take-Charge Approach for Today's Educator* (1976). In subsequent years, Canter & Associates provided a large quantity of materials and programs involving Assertive Discipline for educators and parents. They brought *Assertive Discipline* to millions of teachers and administrators worldwide. In 1998, Canter & Associates merged with Sylvan Learning Systems, which in 2003 made the decision to focus exclusively on postsecondary education. The company changed

its name to Laureate Education, Incorporated, and no longer produces materials or provides workshops on Assertive Discipline.

The Canters' Principal Teachings

By 1978, Assertive Discipline was the most popular of all discipline systems, and it remained so for almost 20 years. The Canters described Assertive Discipline as an approach to help teachers take charge in the classroom by interacting with students in a calm, insistent, and consistent manner. They continually emphasized that **student rights** included learning in a calm, orderly classroom, and that **teacher rights** included teaching without interruptions. They expected school administrators and students' parents to support the system they advocated.

The Canters maintained that students choose to behave as they do—that nothing makes them do so against their will. Accordingly, their system attempted to establish an environment in which students would choose to behave in an acceptable manner. To make this possible, they attempted to ensure that students' and teachers' needs were

met and that behavior was managed assertively but humanely. Further, they advocated the use of clear rules of classroom behavior. When students complied with those rules, the teacher applied positive consequences, such as recognition and praise. When students broke the rules, teachers applied negative consequences in accordance with a carefully structured hierarchy, which would ultimately involve consequences so distasteful that students would choose to comply with class rules. In later years, as more humane measures became popular, the Canters added suggestions for teaching students how to behave properly. They emphasized regularly giving students positive attention, talking helpfully with students who misbehaved, and establishing a sense of mutual trust and respect.

A primary reason for Assertive Discipline's early popularity was the Canters' insistence on the following: Teachers have the right to teach in a professional manner, without disruption. Students have the right to learn in a safe, calm environment, with full support. These rights are best met by take-charge teachers who allow nothing to violate students' best interests. These notions were extremely attractive during a time when students were generally beginning to behave atrociously, and teachers had no method, and no support, to make them do otherwise.

Central to Assertive Discipline was the concept of three contrasting types of teachers. **Hostile teachers** behave in a manner that makes it appear they view students as adversaries. They seem to feel that to maintain order and teach properly, they must keep the upper hand, which they attempt to do by laying down the law, accepting no nonsense, and using commands and stern facial expressions. They sometimes give needlessly strong admonishments, such as, "Sit down, shut up, and listen!" Such messages suggest a dislike for students and make students feel they are being treated unjustly.

Nonassertive teachers take an overly passive approach to students. They fail to help the class formulate reasonable expectations or are inconsistent in dealing with students, allowing certain behaviors one day while strongly disapproving them the next. They often make statements as, "For heaven's sake, please try to behave like ladies and gentlemen" or "How many times do I have to tell you no talking?" They come across as wishy-washy, and after a time, students stop taking them seriously. Yet, when those teachers become overly frustrated, they sometimes come down very hard on students. This inconsistency leaves students confused about expectations and enforcement.

Assertive teachers clearly, confidently, and consistently model and express class expectations. They work to build trust with the class. They teach students how to behave so they can better learn and relate to others, and they implement a discipline plan that encourages student cooperation. Such teachers help students understand which behaviors promote success and which lead to failure. Assertive teachers are not harsh taskmasters. They recognize students' needs for consistent limits on behavior, but at the same time are ever mindful of students' needs for warmth and encouragement. Because they know that students may require direct instruction in how to behave acceptably in the classroom, they might be heard to say, "Our rule is no talking without raising your hand. Please raise your hand and wait for me to call on you."

Each of the response styles produces certain effects on teachers and students. The **hostile response style** takes away most of the pleasure that teachers and students might otherwise enjoy in class. Its harshness curtails the development of trusting relationships

and can produce negative student attitudes toward teachers and school. The **nonassertive response style** leads to student feelings of insecurity and frustration. Nonassertive teachers cannot get their needs met in the classroom, which produces high levels of stress for them. These teachers frequently become hostile toward chronically misbehaving students. Students in turn feel manipulated and many feel little respect for their teachers. The **assertive response style** provides several benefits that the other styles do not. Assertive teachers create a classroom atmosphere that allows both teacher and students to meet their needs. They invite student collaboration and help students practice acceptable behavior. Students learn they can count on their teacher to provide clear expectations, consistency, and an atmosphere of warmth and support. All this engenders a feeling of comfort for everyone and allows teaching and learning to flourish.

The operation of Assertive Discipline is understood through its details. The Canthers urged teachers to make a written discipline plan that clarifies rules, positive recognition, and corrective actions. **Rules** state exactly how students are to behave. They should indicate observable behaviors, such as, "Keep your hands to yourself" rather than vague ideas, such as, "Show respect to other students." Rules should be limited in number (three to five) and refer only to behavior, not to academic issues.

Positive recognition refers to giving sincere personal attention to students who behave in keeping with class expectations. Positive recognition should be used frequently, as it tends to increase self-esteem, encourage good behavior, and build a positive classroom climate. Common ways of providing recognition include encouragement, expressing appreciation, and positive notes and phone calls to parents.

Corrective actions are applied when students interfere with other students' right to learn. Corrective actions are never harmful physically or psychologically, although they will usually be slightly unpleasant for students. The Canthers stress that it is not severity that makes corrective actions effective, but rather consistency in application. When corrective actions must be invoked, students are reminded that, by their behavior, they have chosen the consequence. Teachers usually don't like to invoke corrective actions, but the Canthers remind us that we fail our students when we allow them to disrupt or misbehave without showing we care enough to limit their unacceptable behavior.

When misbehavior occurs, it should be dealt with calmly and quickly. The Canthers advised making a **discipline hierarchy** that lists corrective actions and the order in which they will be imposed within the day. Each day or secondary class period begins afresh. Each consequence in the hierarchy is a bit more unpleasant than its predecessor. The Canthers (1993, p. 85) illustrate the discipline hierarchy with the following examples:

- *First time a student disrupts.* Consequence: "Bobby, our rule is no shouting out. That's a warning."
- *Second or third time the student disrupts.* Consequence: "Bobby, our rule is no shouting out. You have chosen 5 minutes time-out at the back table."
- *Fourth time the student disrupts.* Consequence: "Bobby, you know our rules about shouting out. You have chosen to have your parents called." The teacher informs Bobby's parents. This is done by telephone and is especially effective if Bobby is required to place the call and explain what has happened.

- *Fifth time the student disrupts.* Consequence: "Bobby, our rule is no shouting out. You have chosen to go to the office to talk with the principal about your behavior."
- *Severe clause.* Sometimes behavior is so severe that it is best to invoke the *severe clause*, in which the student is sent to the principal on the first offense. Consequence: "Bobby, fighting is not allowed in this class. You have chosen to go to the principal immediately. We will talk about this later."

To employ the discipline hierarchy effectively, teachers must keep track of offenses that students commit. This can be done by recording on a clipboard students' names and the number of violations. Other options include recording this information in the plan book or, in primary grades, using a system of colored cards that students turn or change after each violation.

The Canters stressed that in order to make a discipline plan work effectively, teachers must teach the plan to their students. It is not enough only to read it aloud or display it on a poster. The Canters provided a number of sample lessons showing how the plan could be taught at different grade levels. The plans followed this sequence:

1. Explain why rules are needed.
2. Teach the specific rules.
3. Check for understanding.
4. Explain how you will reward students who follow rules.
5. Explain why there are corrective actions for breaking the rules.
6. Teach the corrective actions and how they are applied.
7. Check again for understanding.

When the discipline program is first implemented, students are clearly informed of positive recognition and negative corrective actions associated with class rules, and they may participate in role-played situations involving both. They realize that negative corrective actions naturally follow misbehavior. The Canters make these suggestions for invoking negative corrective actions:

- Provide corrective actions calmly in a matter-of-fact manner: "Nathan, speaking like that to others is against our rules. You have chosen to stay after class."
- Be consistent: Provide a consequence every time students choose to disrupt.
- Find the first opportunity after a student receives a consequence to recognize that student's positive behavior: "Nathan, I appreciate how you are working. You are making a good choice."
- Provide an escape mechanism for students who are upset and want to talk about what happened: Allow the student to describe feelings or the situation in a journal or log.

- When a younger student continues to disrupt, move in: Nathan again speaks hurtfully to another student. The teacher moves close to Nathan and quietly and firmly tells him his behavior is inappropriate. She reminds him of the corrective actions he has already received and of the next consequence in the hierarchy.
- When an older student continues to disrupt, move out: Marta once again talks during work time. The teacher asks Marta to step outside the classroom, where she reminds Marta of the inappropriate behavior and possible corrective actions. All the while, the teacher stays calm, shows respect for Marta's feelings, and refrains from arguing.

The Canters concluded that these techniques help almost all students behave in a responsible manner, but they recognize that a few students require additional consideration. Those are the difficult-to-handle students who the Canters (1993, p. 6) describe as "students who are continually disruptive, persistently defiant, demanding of attention or unmotivated. They are the students who defy your authority and cause you stress, frustration and anger." These students are not pleasant to work with, but they are most in need of attention and adult guidance. The Canters suggest making special efforts to (1) reach out to difficult students by trying to establish trust, (2) meet the special needs of difficult students that are not being met in school, and (3) take pains to find ways of communicating more with difficult students.

As time passed, other discipline systems appeared that called for humane cooperation and increased student responsibility in the classroom. Assertive Discipline gave way to the newer approaches to discipline and by the end of the twentieth century, it had largely disappeared from the educational picture, although remnants still form parts of many of the newer discipline systems.

Review of the Canters' Contributions to Discipline

The Canters made several major contributions to classroom discipline. They popularized the concept of rights in the classroom—the rights of students to have teachers help them learn in a calm, safe environment and the rights of teachers to teach without disruption. They explained that students need and want limits that assist their proper conduct and that it is the teacher's responsibility to set and enforce those limits. The Canters were the first to insist that teachers have a right to backing from administrators and cooperation from parents in helping students behave acceptably, and also the first to provide teachers with a workable procedure for correcting misbehavior efficiently through a system of easily administered corrective actions. Over the years, the Canters continually modified their popular approach to ensure that it remained effective as social realities change. Earlier, they focused mainly on teachers' being strong leaders in the classroom, but later moved to greater emphasis on building trusting, helpful relationships with students, providing positive recognition and support, and taking a proactive approach to dealing with problems of behavior.

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS EMPHASIZED IN THIS CHAPTER

The following terms and concepts are pivotal in the contentions of pioneers in modern discipline and appear frequently in systems of discipline now in use.

From Redl and Wattenberg's Group Dynamics	From Gimott's Discipline through Communication	power seeking revenge seeking inadequacy logical consequences punishment true discipline social interest encouragement
group dynamics	congruent communication	
student roles	teachers at their best	
teacher roles	confer dignity	
supporting student	teachers at their worst	
self-control	invite cooperation	
situational assistance	hidden asset	
appraising reality	I-messages	
punishment	you-messages	
	laconic language	
	evaluative praise	
	appreciative praise	
	why questions	
	self-discipline	
	sane messages	
	genuine discipline	
From Skinner's Behavior Shaping	From Dreikurs's Discipline through Democratic Teaching	From the Canter's Assertive Discipline
behavior modification	self-control	student rights
shaping behavior	democratic classroom	teacher rights
constant reinforcement	autocratic classroom	hostile teachers
intermittent reinforcement	permissive classroom	nonassertive teachers
successive approximations	genuine goal of behavior	assertive teachers
punishment	belonging	hostile response style
	mistaken goals	nonassertive response style
	attention-seeking	assertive response style
		rules
		positive recognition
		corrective actions
		discipline hierarchy
From Kounin's Lesson and Group Management		
withitness		
overlapping		
group alerting		
momentum		
smoothness		
satiation		

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Enter into your journal items of information from this chapter that are pertinent to the five guiding principles for building a personal system of discipline.
2. It was noted that except for Assertive Discipline, none of the discipline systems described in this chapter found widespread use *as a total system*. What do you understand to be the reason for this, given the number of excellent suggestions they contain?
3. Of the approaches reviewed in this chapter, which seemed most useful to you? Which seemed least useful? Why?
4. Despite the presence today of many effective systems of discipline, some teachers still try to maintain discipline by out-shouting their students, speaking sarcastically, and treating students disrespectfully. Why do you believe they persist with these tactics? How effective do you think these tactics are with today's students?

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Three Bridges to Twenty-First-Century Discipline

Authoritative Input

- William Glasser / Choice Theory
- Thomas Gordon / Self-Discipline
- Alfie Kohn / Beyond Discipline

In Chapter 4 we saw how discipline changed during the last half of the twentieth century. It went from teacher authoritarianism to a more benign and humane relationship between teachers and students. Further significant changes were occurring as the twentieth century merged into the twenty-first. Those changes reflected the strong influence of three persons of note—William Glasser, Thomas Gordon, and Alfie Kohn—who provided bridges between older approaches to discipline and newer concepts that brought students into ever closer cooperation with teachers, where both play roles in working together for the benefit of the class as a whole. The primary concepts contributed by those authorities were *Choice Theory*, formulated and popularized by William Glasser, *Tactics of Communication*, emphasized by Thomas Gordon, and *Classrooms as Communities*, formalized and popularized by Alfie Kohn. Glasser's Choice Theory moved toward meeting students' predominant needs while striving for overall quality in teaching and learning. Gordon's communication tactics focused on influencing students rather than making demands on them. And Kohn's Classrooms as Communities helped teachers establish in their classes "communities of learners" where cooperation and helpfulness predominate. Those three approaches established trends so well-received that they now play strongly in almost all systems of discipline. Here, we explore the nature of those approaches and the practices they advocate.