Positive and Not So Positive Discipline Techniques!

Addressing problems of inappropriate behavior and discipline are just a few of the tough jobs teachers are expected to do. Unmotivated students, increased violence, lack of resources and large class sizes are a few of the problems facing our Nation’s schools. It is not surprising then that society as a whole perceives a lack of discipline as the major concern in today’s public schools. However, how teachers address the more global problem of empowering students to successfully manage their own behaviors is the most difficult task.

Increasing appropriate behavior and decreasing inappropriate behavior is essential in creating a safe, positive, and nurturing learning environment (Lavay, French, & Henderson, 1997). There are many different approaches and strategies teachers can use to provide opportunities for students to learn how to decrease the occurrence of discipline problems in their classes. The following are “back to basics” strategies that all teachers should revisit either as a reflection on current practice or as a primer when starting a new job.

In light of the many discussions with Physical Education and Adapted Physical Education teachers enrolled in the graduate level course entitled Positive Discipline and Behavior Management in Physical Education at SUNY Cortland, reinforcing the “basics” of behavior management is an ideal way to start a new semester. Here are eleven techniques that can be used to empower students while reinforcing what most good teachers already know about behavior management and effective use of discipline.

Techniques that work when used appropriately!

1. **Class Attention.** It’s simple, but be sure you have the attention of everyone in your gym before you start your lesson. Try not to start by attempting to teach over the chatter of students who are not paying attention. Inexperienced teachers will at times think that by beginning their lesson, the class will settle down. Unfortunately, the teacher is reinforcing that they are willing to talk over or compete with the student’s conversation. Students begin to get the idea that it is acceptable to be inattentive and talk while you are teaching.

   Gaining class attention simply means that you demand student attention before you begin. Experienced teachers know that silence on their part can be a very effective technique. They will punctuate their waiting by extending it 5 to 10 seconds even after the students are completely quiet. Then they begin their lesson using a quieter – more normal – voice tone.

   A soft spoken teacher can often have a more focused and attentive class than one with a loud stronger voice simply because the students know they must be quiet in order to receive the next set of directions.

2. **Expectation.** Uncertainty increases the level of excitement in the gym. The technique of expectation is to begin each class by telling the students exactly what will be happening and what you (the teacher) expects from them for that day. Outlining what will be done and presenting a timeline of the tasks for the lesson can also be effective.

   An effective strategy to use includes allowing the student’s time at the end of class to practice on skills or games of their choosing. The teacher may say to the students: “If we have additional time at the end of the period, you can play or practice at any of the stations around the gym”.

   As long as the teacher is comfortable that the class has worked long enough on the days objective, time left over can be used for student choice. The students soon realize that the more time the teacher has to wait for their attention, the less time they will have at the end of the hour.

3. **Performance Checking.** The key to this principle is to circulate around the gym and or stations and check progress on performance. Staying in one spot makes it difficult to provide positive reinforcement and encouragement on an individual basis.
An effective teacher will move throughout the whole gym or field space in about two - five minutes after the students have started the activity. The delay allows the teacher to see which students or group of students need assistance or clarification. Students or groups who are not yet on task will be quick to get going as they see the teacher approach. Those that appear distracted or slow to get started can be encouraged and given individual instruction.

Try not to disrupt the class or make general announcements unless several students have difficulty with the same thing. When in a situation where disruption of the activity is required, keep the announcement short and specific demanding full attention before you begin. Ask for clarification or call on a student to repeat the direction prior to sending the students back to the activity.

4. **Teacher as Model.** It has been frequently said that "Values are caught, not taught." Teachers who demonstrate how to be courteous, who are prompt, enthusiastic, in control, patient, and organized provide examples for their students through their own behavior. Teachers who "do as I say, not as I do" send mixed messages that confuse students and invite misbehavior.

If you want students to demonstrate good sportsmanship and be courteous to others then as teachers we must do the same. In addition, we must reinforce students who are observed engaging in the type of behavior we want to see. In other words, “catch them being good – and tell them about it!”

5. **Non-Verbal Signals.** Novel signals such as raising ones hand, blowing a whistle, shaking a tamborene, pounding a drum, or starting/stopping music are all effective methods of gaining class attention. Shouting over the noise in the gym only escalates the noise level and perpetuates the amount of time it takes to gain the classes attention. Be sure to explain to the students what the signal means prior to using it and expect the same response each and every time.

6. **Managing the Environment.** A school can be a warm cheery or dark and dreary place for students to be. Create an environment in your gym that embraces the most important messages you hope to teach throughout your curriculum. Reinforce these concepts (e.g. good sportsmanship) in different ways and display them on bulletin boards and when possible incorporate them into your lessons.

Students enjoy an environment that are colorful and stimulating as well as provide a level of self reinforcement. For example, a question can be posted on the exit door of the gym or on a bulletin board asking students if they met one of the following good sportsmanship “rules” for the day. In this way, students self reflect on the importance of managing their own behavior as well as meeting one of the expectations set forth to be a good sportsman.

7. **Calm Intervention.** Most students are sent to the principal's office as a result of misbehavior that has escalated beyond the teacher’s control. The teacher has called them on a lesser offense, but in the moments that follow, the student and the teacher are swept up in a verbal maelstrom. Much of this can be avoided when the teacher’s intervention is quiet and calm.

An effective teacher will take care that the student is not rewarded for misbehavior by becoming the focus of attention. Experienced teachers often anticipate the problem and stop it before it occurs without ever saying a word. For example, simple proximity – or putting oneself near the problem can often defuse a situation before it occurs. The use of “hypodermic” affection, or a shot of positive reinforcement can quickly and effectively redirect a student bent on disruption. Teachers who get to know their students and who monitor their students closely can effectively minimize inappropriate off-task behavior.
8. **Positive Reinforcement.** Make ample use of praise. When you see good behavior, acknowledge it. This can be done verbally, of course, but it doesn't have to be. A nod, a smile or a "thumbs up" will reinforce the behavior. Use positive reinforcement specific to the skill to help refine movement patterns and correct errors while maintaining positive self image.

9. **Assertive I-Messages.** Assertive I-Messages are statements that the teacher uses when confronting a student who is misbehaving or disrupting the class. Assertive I messages are clear descriptions of what you expect the student to do. For example, a student who continues to push and shove may get an immediate time out from the teacher in this fashion: "Johnny, I need you to put yourself in time out". The teacher who makes good use of this technique will focus the child's attention first and foremost on the behavior that is desired and not on the misbehavior. "I want you to ..." or "I need you to ..." or "I expect you to ..." are all phrases that promote assertive I messages and provide clear teacher expectation.

An inexperienced teacher may say to the same student: "Johnny, I want you to stop shoving and pushing..." only to discover that this usually triggers confrontation and some form of denial or blame on others. When the focus is on the misbehavior students are able to respond in one of the following ways: "I wasn't doing anything!" or "It wasn't my fault ..." or "Since when is there a rule against ...". When this occurs, the student has successfully engaged the teacher in a form of confrontation that will most probably end in escalation.

10. **Humanistic I-Messages.** Humanistic I-messages are expressions of how we feel. Thomas Gordon, creator of Teacher Effectiveness Training (TET), structures these messages in three parts. First, a description of the child's behavior. "When you talk while I talk ..." Second, the effect this behavior has on the teacher. "... I have to stop teaching ..." And third, the feeling that it generates in the teacher. "... which frustrates me."

Effective teachers will often use this technique after a confrontation has occurred and the student has been removed from the setting. It helps teachers express the problem to the child and clearly identifies the impact their behavior has on the teacher and the class.

11. **Proactive Discipline.** When setting out to define the rules you will use for your classroom, there are several factors to keep in mind. Rules that describe the behavior you expect or want are by far more effective than rules that list what students can’t do. For example, “no pushing and shoving” could be more effective if written as “learn personal space”. Instead of “no fighting” try “use your words before your fists”. Refer to rules as expectation. Each of these let students know how you expect them to act and behave when in physical education.
Techniques that could backfire if used inappropriately!

raising your voice unnecessarily
yelling
saying "I'm the boss here"
insisting on having the last word
using tense or aggressive body language, such as rigid posture, clenched fists, or shoulder
using degrading, insulting, humiliating, or embarrassing put-downs
using sarcasm
attacking the student's character
acting superior
using physical force unnecessarily
drawing unrelated persons into the conflict
having a double standard -- making students do what I say, not what I do
lack of consistent programming
insisting that you right
making assumptions about what occurred
backing the student into a corner A I know you did it...@ or A Why did you do it?@
pleading or bribing
bringing up unrelated events
generalizing about students by making remarks such as "All you kids are the same"
making unsubstantiated accusations
holding a grudge
nagging
throwing a temper tantrum
mimicking the student
making comparisons with siblings or other students
commanding, demanding, dominating
rewarding the student

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