

One Question A Day

Good morning! This is A to Z KIDS ROCK, the station where kids count. This is Harley and Sarah—live!—bringing you this morning’s announcements...

... And now, for our Question of the Day:

Before Christmas, our school made an effort to help people who aren’t as fortunate as we are. We raised money to send to students in Africa and we collected pennies to buy gifts for children who live in our own town.

Even though these projects are now officially over, one little Kindergarten girl in our school is still thinking about helping others. This week she brought in a small plastic bag of her own money and asked her teacher to give it to some poor people. The teacher took the money to the food bank where it was gratefully received; there are people in our town who don’t have money to buy enough food.

*We would say that this little girl is **internally** motivated to help others. What does this mean?*

And so begins a typical day at Alex Aitken Elementary, in Duncan, British Columbia, Canada—with a question designed to prompt students to **inwardly reflect**, and **inspire**

them to aim quietly but consciously toward the highest level of human behaviour—that which is *motivated from a genuine desire within*.

Each morning after the more standard school announcements, students listen with interest to find out what topic will be highlighted as “Question of the Day.” This homegrown program, now six years old, was first created in the mood of experimentation. Prompted by a study of Marvin Marshall’s three teaching principles¹—positivity, choice and reflection—our teachers decided to find out if what the author promised was true. Could we more effectively deal with issues of social responsibility simply by changing our habits? By focusing on the **positive**, by proactively making responsibility an attractive **choice**, and by deliberately training ourselves to do more **asking** than telling, could we interest students in becoming socially responsible? It certainly seemed worthwhile to try!

For a year prior to the implementation of our “Question of the Day,” we concluded our daily morning announcements with a short statement or simple request designed to encourage students to take responsibility in the classroom and out on the playground—“Please wipe your feet when you come in today,” “Always treat your friends nicely,” or “Don’t forget to wash your hands before you eat.” Although all good suggestions, students didn’t seem very interested in listening to our advice. Their faces and lack of attention said it all: “Ho-hum!”

We made a decision to switch things up. Instead of *telling* students what to do, we began to *ask* them to think for themselves. We started to conclude our morning Announcements with a question rather than a statement. When announcement *statements* became

announcement *questions*, we noticed that the students began to pay attention. We could see it in their body language, in their faces and by the fact that across the school, hands spontaneously started rising to share thoughts connected to our “Question of the Day.” We knew we were on to something!

Guided by yet another understanding gained from Marshall’s book, Discipline without Stress, Punishments or Rewards (www.marvinmarshall.com), that “emotions drive attention and attention drives learning”—we deliberately began to pose questions in a way that would engage our students. Although a simple question such as “What are some things you can do today to be a caring person?” was more effective in gaining attention than a short statement reminding students to be friendly, we noticed that a question *preceded with information or an anecdote*, provided an emotional hook that was even more compelling.

Yesterday at recess a student accidentally fell while playing and badly scraped both knees on the pavement. Immediately, a large group of children of all ages gathered around, offering encouragement and help. One student ran to get the duty teacher. Someone else offered to take the injured person inside to clean up and many others asked, “Are you okay?”

Although it might seem like a little thing to help someone on the playground, in the long run it’s little things like this that make our school a caring place. Can you think of a time when someone showed caring to you at school?

Enlightened by an insight gained from developmental child psychologist, Dr. Gordon Neufeld² (www.gordonneufeld.com), and supported by Stephen Covey's assertion in his well-known "Seven Habits" approach³ that *personal* victories precede *public* ones, we understood it was important that the majority of our "Questions" guide students to consider issues of *personal* responsibility. Although our long-range goal might be the development of *social* responsibility, we knew we couldn't put the cart before the horse. We couldn't expect elementary school students—particularly younger ones—to develop the more sophisticated habits of acting responsibly within social settings, without encouraging them first to develop foundational character habits of personal responsibility.

From Neufeld, we understood that if we could help students become more *personally* responsible, social responsibility would almost take care of itself. It made sense. The development of a strong sense of personal responsibility within an individual ***naturally leads to a strong internal desire*** to act in *socially* responsible ways. Personally responsible people ***want*** to be socially responsible; to be otherwise creates a sense of inner dissonance that is difficult to ignore or tolerate. It's not typically necessary to police such people or expend much effort to convince them to do right.

Excited, we began to build a bank of "Announcement Questions" that could be repeated year after year:

This afternoon we will be meeting in House Teams to go on a special tour of the school. The goal of the tour is to give everyone a chance to learn the procedures of Alex Aitken School.

The teachers think it's important that all kids in the school know what's expected in various areas such as the playground, the bus line and the hallways. Why will it be important for you to listen carefully while on the tour?

Today each class will have individual photographs taken. There's always some waiting time involved as everyone stands in line for a turn.

Anyone watching can easily spot the mature students at a time like this. Mature students are the ones who are able to handle "waiting time" well. They don't need adults to baby-sit them every moment; they are in charge of their own behaviour. What does it look like if someone your age is waiting with maturity?

This evening we have parent-teacher interviews at our school. Two things that parents and teachers usually talk about are work habits and behaviour.

Your parents may want to know how well you pay attention to lessons, whether or not you are organized, and how well you manage yourself on the playground.

How does your teacher know what to say about you?

Wanting to keep our program current, each year we interspersed the more “Frequently Asked Questions” with fresh topics, often related to special events or school projects that arose specifically in that year.

Today Canadians are choosing a new government. Since our school gym is being used as a polling station, all day long we will see people coming to vote. We are seeing democracy in action!

In a democracy, we say that voting is both a right and a responsibility. Why do you think the people coming to Alex Aitken School today believe it is important to vote?

It wasn't long before we noticed that our “Questions” provided an opportunity to draw student attention, en masse, to issues that adults in the school felt were problematic. Well aware, however, that whatever we chose to focus upon would naturally tend to increase, we knew it was critical to remain positive—especially when presenting situations that were inherently negative. We took great care to word our “Questions” in ways that dignified students, conveyed high expectations and encouraged them to voluntarily seek responsible solutions.

*Inside our schoolyard, there is one area where students are asked **not** to go for safety reasons.*

Were you thinking of the parking lot? Despite the fact that everyone would agree that playing near cars is never safe, there are a number of students who keep playing in the parking lot.

Smart people think for themselves. Instead of blindly following someone who isn't making a wise choice, smart people choose to take care of themselves.

What would you do, or say, if someone started to lead you out to play in the parking lot?

By being both **positive** and **proactive** with our daily “Questions,” we found that we could set students up to experience success, in situations in which previously we had witnessed problems.

This week we're all looking forward to our annual Book Fair. Everyone enjoys the chance to look at brand new books set out on tables—it's just like a store!

*Well, in fact it **is** a store, so when we go into the library this week, we need to use the same kind of manners that we would expect to use in a bookstore downtown.*

*What's the best way to handle a book that you'd like to **look at** but might not actually **buy**?*

“Questions” to prompt reflection/discussion about various character traits seemed like logical additions to the program. Sometimes simple quotes were featured.

*Have you ever had a time when you tried to learn a new skill and found yourself challenged? In other words, whatever it was that you wanted to learn was a bit difficult for you; you needed **perseverance** to succeed.*

For some people learning to spell correctly is a challenge. For others, learning math facts is a challenge and still others find that learning to shoot a basketball through the hoop or play the recorder is a challenge.

Today we have a quote that might encourage anyone who is facing a learning challenge. Dr. Thomas Fuller said: “All things are difficult before they are easy.” What was Dr. Fuller trying to tell us?

As we started to experiment in the classroom with Marshall’s approach for promoting responsibility, we began to see great potential in using the language and concepts presented in his leveled teaching chart, ***The Hierarchy of Social Development***, to further increase the motivational impact of our daily Announcement Questions.

THE HIERARCHY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Level D – Democracy: Democracy and responsibility are inseparable.

- Develops self-discipline
- Deliberately chooses to act with responsibility
- Displays genuine compassion
- Demonstrates initiative

Level D motivation is internal.

At this level the person does the right thing simply because it is the right thing to do. In so doing, they are “rewarded” with a powerful, inner sense of satisfaction.

Level C – Cooperation/Conformity

- Complies
- Cooperates
- Conforms to acceptable standards and expectations

Level C motivation is external.

At this level the person conforms to what is expected, but the motivation is to please someone else, receive some external reward, or avoid punishment.

NOTE: Only Levels C and D are acceptable levels.

Level B – Bossing/Bullying *(Always unacceptable)*

- Bosses or bullies others
- Breaks laws and makes own rules and standards
- Bows down in the face of negative peer pressure

Must be bossed to behave.

At this level (and the level below,) the person can expect that someone in authority will take charge.

Level A – Anarchy (*Always unacceptable*)

- Absence of order
- Aimless and chaotic
- Absence of government

Anarchy is the fundamental enemy of civilization.

Recognizing that adults are often inspired to action by true stories of individuals who operate from the level of internal motivation, we felt sure that young people would be similarly affected. We started to write “Questions” interwoven with acknowledgements. We described both individual students in our school (such as the Kindergarten child who wanted to help the poor,) and groups of students, who demonstrated moments of Level D motivation.

Today we share a story about some grade six students in our school who solved a problem all on their own.

You may remember a few weeks ago there were some concerns about rough play on the football field. Some behaviour was less than acceptable—in other words, it was Level B. The teachers were beginning to wonder if they would need to step in and take control.

Instead they were pleasantly surprised. The football players showed initiative; they asked to solve the problem for themselves. Here’s what they did: They held a meeting and came up with a set of rules that everyone agreed were fair and that

would keep all players safe. We're happy to report that their solutions seem to be working!

What level is it when people take the initiative to solve their own problems?

Seeing the eagerness of students as they responded to our “Questions of the Day” spurred us on. Could we use our “Questions” to motivate children to act from the highest level, D—the level from which action is prompted by a genuine internal desire to do what is right or good, without the promise of an *external* reward? We decided to find out.

For many years our school had participated in a program to recycle old telephone books. As many schools do, we encouraged our students to do well in such campaigns by setting up class vs. class competitions, offering pizza parties as attractive prizes to urge them on. Although collection numbers were high, as we studied *The Hierarchy of Social Development*, we started to feel rather uncomfortable with our motivational methods.

Although the level of external motivation (Level C) was acceptable, it was clearly *not the highest level* of human social development. Inside ourselves we began to notice a certain troubling sense of dissonance: As teachers, didn't we have a responsibility to encourage young people to aim for the *highest* level of behavior—not second best? We started to move in a direction that would be more in line with a school hoping to promote internal motivation.

Once again looking to models of mature adult behavior for guidance, we began to point out “the real reasons for doing things.” Instead of focusing on pepperoni pizza and the boisterous rah-rah attitude required to “beat the class next door,” we adopted a quieter,

respectful approach. We used our morning “Questions”—along with a few charts and graphs—to prompt student thinking. We explained that by collecting and recycling phone books, individuals could make a difference in the world. They could do something to protect nature and help prevent further global warming. Then, as leaders in any cause would do, we enthusiastically asked students for support:

Today is the start of our drive to collect old phone books. Do you know why we do this? Here is a fact found on the Internet: For every 36 phone books that we recycle, we save one 7-foot tree from being cut down.

Here is an opportunity to show some initiative. How many people do you know who might have a phone book you could recycle?

All year long at Alex Aitken, we show concern for the Earth. We wash out plastics and tin cans. We put food scraps into a compost bin. We pick up litter around our playground and we recycle paper and drink containers.

Now, for one month, we are also adding phone books to our recycling list.

Everyone wonders how many trees we will save this year and whether we will be able to beat our old record! How is recycling phone books connected to taking care of our Earth?

Not surprisingly—when you consider that youth is often characterized as a time of life when idealism, optimism and enthusiasm are strongest—our phone book collection numbers, first matched, then consistently exceeded the numbers achieved during the

years when we assumed it was necessary to dangle pizza as an incentive. In the long run, an inner sense of pride and satisfaction is far more rewarding than the momentary pleasure of a slice of pizza. To deny our youth opportunities to reach for the highest level of behavior—that which is motivated *internally*—is to underestimate their capacity to be fully human.

By asking “One Question A Day,” we joyously discovered that in the same way that adults can be encouraged to contribute to society or can feel excited by the thought of consciously making decisions that are personally and socially responsible, so too can young people be inspired to act with personal integrity and social responsibility.

Author’s note: To view the Alex Aitken “Announcement Questions” for the current school year, visit www.disciplineanswers.com

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References

³Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. Toronto: Simon & Schuster.

¹Marshall, M. (2007). *Discipline without Stress, Punishments or Rewards: How Teachers and Parents Promote Responsibility & Learning. (2nd Edition)* Los Alamitos, CA: Piper Press.

²Neufeld, G., & Mate, G. (2004). *Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Matter.* Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf.