

Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

RULES VS. EXPECTATIONS

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Expand your expectations.

You will have more success and less stress than teaching obedience to rules.

Expected behavior is more effectively achieved through the use of standards than rules.

REDUCING RULES

A common practice in this country is to establish classroom rules, either by the teacher or by the teacher and students cooperatively.

Rules are necessary in games, but **in relationships rules are counterproductive**. Although the establishment of rules has good intentions, their implementation often produces deleterious effects. When Johns Hopkins University researchers analyzed data from more than 600 of the nation's schools, they found six characteristics associated with discipline problems. Notice that the first three concerned rules.

1. Rules were unclear or perceived as unfairly or inconsistently enforced.
2. Students didn't believe in the rules.
3. Teachers and administrators didn't know what the rules were or disagreed on the proper responses to student misconduct.
4. Teacher-administrator cooperation was poor or the administration was inactive.
5. Misconduct was ignored.
6. Teachers tended to have punitive attitudes.

When a student does not follow a class rule, the tendency is to think in negative terms.

The reason is simple; rules in a classroom imply "or else." A rule that is not followed often leads to an accusatory encounter and results in some type of psychological pain, anger, or resentment for both teacher and student. The rationale is that there must be a consequence for breaking the rule. A consequence is a light punishment that, by its very nature, is coercive. It encourages feelings of enmity, which are not very conducive for positive relationships.

The fact that teachers tend to have punitive attitudes is a natural outgrowth of establishing rules. This was verified in the Number Six finding of the Johns Hopkins study. **Rulemaking breeds enforcement, which promotes punitive attitudes and results in a teacher's moving from the role of a coach to the role of a cop.**

Dr. William Glasser affirms that "traditional education often produces problems that stem from poorly conceived and poorly administered rules."

At present, in both elementary and secondary schools, we usually establish rigid rules that lead to punishment when they are broken. The rigid rules of the average central-city school

cause even those who have more to gain, the intelligent, to rebel and to refuse to accept the education available.

(William Glasser, *Schools Without Failure*, 1969, p. 195)

He concludes that an inflexible, punitive approach works poorly especially with central-city children, "most of whom have difficulty obeying rules."

Classroom rules often work against the very reason for their existence: to have students self discipline and maintain decorum. Quality schools and quality workplaces do not rely on rules.

Neither does citizenship education rely on rules. Citizenship education has to do with appropriate and inappropriate classroom conduct, and rules are kept to a minimum—such as respect for one another and safety. Citizenship is really little more than the conscious practice of civic etiquette—the public manners that make the places where we live workable when we practice them and unbearable when we don't.

Rules are not effective in teaching moral development. Many parents, teachers, and religious leaders find out too late that a concentrated or exclusive focus on rules is problematic. **Using rules and attempting to enforce them as the principal method of producing compliance has not been successful.** In fact, it often creates defiance. Many schools, for instance, have established school-wide citizenship programs because large numbers of students are tardy, absent, or otherwise fail to comply with school policies and procedures. This program consisted of an enforcement system that required noncompliant students to participate in hours of community service or other educational programs for each failure to comply. 'Teeth' were added by announcing that failure to comply or complete the service hours would prevent students from graduating. It was not long until schools were forced to create large-scale service and educational programs that required extra record keeping because large and increasing numbers of students failed to comply. **The rule system designed to decrease noncompliance actually appeared to promote it.** (A. Lynn Scoresby, *Teaching Moral Development*, 1996, p. 28)

The mere fact that one knows a rule does not mean it will be followed, in much the same way that information that has been taught does not mean it was learned. When we discover that a teaching has not been learned, we try to assist the student. Similarly, behavior is learned, and the student should be helped, not hurt or caused to suffer.

Rules are "left-hemisphered." They are sensible, orderly, and structured. However, students who "break the rules" often operate spontaneously and process randomly—typical "right-hemisphere" behavior. In addition, rules often engender the search for loopholes. **Teachers would be better served by using standards, courtesies, manners, or procedures—rather than rules.**

STANDARDS

The term, standard, connotes a positive orientation. **When a standard is not met, a helping mentality is engendered, rather than an enforcement mentality.** The use of the term also implies consideration for others.

A standard fosters a "We are all in this together" attitude and counters a major finding of the Johns Hopkins study, namely that many students believe "rules" are mandates that adults put on students, but do not apply to adults.

Standards engender student empowerment. They promote an esprit de corps in the classroom, similar to what occurs with any team. Standards serve as expectations, and **expectations are responsibility lifting**. They tap into internal motivation and foster commitment, rather than compliance.

Notice that the following two sets of examples of classroom standards connote expectations, rather than obedience to rules:

- Do my work
- Have materials
- Be where I belong
- Control myself
- Follow directions

- Speak considerately
- Be prompt
- Bring materials
- Listen for instructions
- Honor self and others
- Accept ownership of my choices

COURTESIES AND MANNERS

Edmund Burke, the 18th century British statesman, said that manners are more important than laws. According to the George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), the Irish political activist and playwright, "Without good manners human society becomes intolerable and impossible."

Manners are courtesies; they are what make civilization civil. Hal Urban is a professional speaker, former teacher, and author of the award-winning book, *Life's Greatest Lessons: 20 Things I Want My Kids to Know*. He suggests holding discussions on the topic.

Following are some questions that foster manners and further reduce the necessity for rules:

- Would a society be better if people treated each other with respect?
- How are classrooms and schools societies?
- How can good manners be one of the most important keys to success in life?
- What is the Golden Rule? How is it civilizing?
- Which impresses people more: being cool or being courteous?

The following questions promote additional reflection on the topic:

- What do you think about getting up, walking across the room, throwing something in the wastebasket, and then walking back across the room while the teacher is talking?
- What do you think about speaking to others and especially adults in a defiant manner?
- What are disadvantages of swearing in classrooms and in conversations between classes?
- What difference does it make when approaching someone with, "May I please have. . . ." in a pleasant tone versus saying, "I need. . . ." in a demanding tone?
- What are the advantages to using, "Please," and "Thank you."?
- What do you think about listening when the teacher is talking versus feeling the right to ignore the teacher and have a private conversation?
- What do you think about listening when a fellow class member asks a question?

- What do you think about demonstrating an interest in other people's feelings versus being solely concerned with yourself?

PROCEDURES

Very often, what a teacher refers to as a rule is really a procedure. We need look no further than to one of the first rules primary students are given. They are taught the classroom rule of raising one's hand to be recognized by the teacher before speaking out. The same rule is taught year after year. I have even seen this rule posted in eighth grade classrooms! **Simply reminding students that this is a procedure, rather than a rule, places the teacher in the position of a coach and eliminates an enforcement mentality.**

We too often assume that students know what we know and what we would like them to do. Do not make such an assumption. **Teach procedures**, such as how to enter the classroom, how to use an activity center, how to distribute supplies, or anything else that requires a mode of operation. A successful classroom has routines and procedures, which give organization and structure to learning. The outstanding teacher communicates high expectations and then teaches procedures to facilitate them.

KEY POINTS

- **Rules are necessary in games but are counterproductive in relationships.**
- **Relationships improve as rules are reduced.**
- **Rules foster obedience rather than responsibility.**
- **The use of standards accomplish what rules purport to do, but without their disadvantages.**
- **Discussing courtesies and manners are more effective than posting rules.**
- **Teach procedures. They accomplish what you want rules to do.**

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