

Chapter Fifteen

Being Consistent: Our Thoughts

No Means No

Being "In Charge"

In the classroom you are in charge. You make the rules and establish the behavioral boundaries. If you are not in charge, no one is in charge.

Often you will have to say "no" to misbehavior. When you do, you want the problem to stop. If it doesn't, that small problem is on its way to becoming a big problem.

How do you say "no" and make it stick? Perhaps a story about my mom will help. She was an ex-school teacher, and for all I know, she wrote the book on Meaning Business.

A Story about My Mom

When I was a little kid, we lived next door to the Smoyer family. Tommy Smoyer was my playmate, and Mrs. Smoyer (his mom, whose first name was none of my business) was dearly loved by us kids.

Not only was Mrs. Smoyer a nice lady, but she was also a compulsive baker. On a typical afternoon our play would be interrupted by Mrs. Smoyer opening the screen door to her back porch and calling, "Kids, come in now!" This meant that we were about to have a treat – something she had baked. Maybe it would be chocolate chip cookies or, better yet, brownies!

Preview

- There are no degrees of consistency. You are either *consistent*, or you are *inconsistent*.
- If a student is disrupting in the classroom and you fail to intervene, you have just taught that student that their goofing off is acceptable behavior.
- When you see unacceptable behavior, therefore, you are on the horns of a dilemma. You either act and your rules become reality, or you fail to act and your rules are nothing but hot air.
- Consequently, in your classroom at all times *discipline comes before instruction*.
- You must have absolute clarity in your own mind as to where your behavioral boundaries lie. Without *mental clarity* you cannot have *behavioral clarity*.

But some days Mrs. Smoyer would open her screen door and say, "Tommy, come in now!" This meant that she had baked a pie and would be serving it to her family rather than to the kids in the neighborhood.

One afternoon as we were playing in the backyard, I began to smell gingerbread wafting from Mrs. Smoyer's kitchen. I love gingerbread! I could hardly wait for my piece. As dinner time approached, Mrs. Smoyer opened her screen door and said, "Tommy, come in now!"

My heart sank. I wanted gingerbread! Life was unfair! Why couldn't I have gingerbread too? I wanted justice.

So, I ran across the driveway into my mother's kitchen where she was preparing dinner. I opened my negotiations where all children open negotiations, at *whine level number one*.

"Mom, may I have something to eat? Tommy's getting gingerbread."

My mother turned from the stove and said,

"Fred, I'm going to have this meal on the table in 45 minutes. Now, I don't want to ruin your appetite."

This was a clear communication. But I was young. I escalated the negotiations to *whine level number two*.

"But Mom, can't I have *something*? Don't we have some ginger snaps? I'm hungry!"

My mother said,

"Fred, I am not going to give you a snack now and

then watch you sit at the dinner table and just *peck at your food*."

My mother always used bird analogies when describing my eating habits. I was obviously getting nowhere. But I knew exactly what to do. I went to *whine level number three*.

"But this isn't *fair*! Tommy gets gingerbread. Can't I have something?"

Suddenly the mood in the room changed. My mother put down her spatula and turned slowly to face me. She looked at me intently as she wiped her hands on her apron. Then she said,

"Fred, I said *no*, and *no* means *no*."

I couldn't just give up. After all, life had been unfair.

"But why can't I? Tommy gets..."

I was cut off in mid-sentence. My mother, with eyes squarely focused on mine, said,

"Fred, I am *not* going to stand here and listen to your *yammering*. ('Yammering' was my mother's code for, *You are really pushing it*.) You may either go outside to play until I call you, or you may open your mouth *one more time* and end up sitting on the stairs."

My sense of injustice must have been profound.

"But, why can't I..."

Those were the last words spoken. My mother stood before me with eyes fixed and finger pointing to the stairs. I knew it was over. I felt something inside wilt. I was silently ushered to the stairs to sit.

Rules To Live By

Rule #1 – No means no.

Rule #2 – I am not going to stand here and listen to your yammering.

Mother finished preparing dinner, and Dad came home from work. My older brother, Tom, came home from playing at a friend's house and was given a quick gesture to leave when he started to ask me why I was sitting there.

Mother set the table, and then called Dad and Tom to dinner. When they were seated, Mother turned to me and, without a trace of upset in her voice, said,

"Fred, you may join us now."

I was relieved! And I was more than a bit humbled. But I learned to think twice before trying to badger my mother.

Rules To Live By

I have no idea how many times I was sent to the stairs during my early childhood, but I am sure that it was more than once. From these experiences I learned two very important lessons that made my subsequent growing up much easier:

Rule #1 – No means no.

Rule #2 – I am not going to stand here and listen to your yammering.

Weenie Parents

Years later I found myself on the faculty of the University of Rochester Medical Center training interns and postdocs to work with families. The majority of our cases in the child outpatient clinic had to do with "brat" behavior. A typical case might have a father, age 37, a mother, age 35, and a single child, age 3. Who do you think was running the household?

"Therapy," in these cases, involved training parents in behavior management. It consisted of Say, See, Do Teaching with lots of practice and immediate feedback.

As you might imagine, one of the cornerstones of discipline management was, "No means no." With practice my clients even became adept at saying, "I am not going to stand here and listen to your yammering."

But, some parents just couldn't bring themselves to set limits. To begin a session, I would ask, "How did it go this week?" Then the excuses would start.

"Welll... We were in the supermarket, and he kept pulling the cans off the shelf. The faster I put them back, the faster he pulled them off. Then they all fell down. I didn't know what to do."

"Welll... We were in a restaurant, and we had already ordered our food when he started to throw the hard rolls. We couldn't just leave, could we?"

"Welll... We were at grandmother's, and I didn't want to make a scene. She is an old woman, and she is easily upset."

"Welll... It was his birthday party, and I didn't know what to do when he started running around and hitting the other children. I couldn't send him to his room in the middle of his birthday party, could I?"



No means no.

These parents just couldn't bring themselves to say "no" and "make it stick." The nickname for these parents around the clinic was "weenies." You will have conferences with many "weenie parents" in the course of your career.

Consistency

Kind of Consistent

The mental part of Meaning Business centers on a clear understanding of *consistency*—consistency in setting limits on children's misbehavior. Consistency is a word that everyone knows but few people really understand. We all know that consistency is crucial to child rearing. But, exactly how does it work?

One of my weenie parents said, "But, Dr. Jones, I think we are being *pretty consistent*." When I told this to my colleagues, we had a big laugh. We had a bigger laugh when one of my other weenie parents said, "But, Dr. Jones, I think we *are* consistent *most of the time*."

What weenies fail to understand about consistency is that it does not permit *degrees*. You are either *consistent*, or you are *inconsistent*. There is nothing in between. There is no such thing as "pretty consistent" or "very consistent" or "extremely consistent."

Building Brat Behavior

In previous chapters we discussed the building of brat behavior through reinforcement errors. Reinforcement errors occur whenever you are consistent "most of the time."

Imagine, for example, that my mother, instead of being consistent, had been *pretty consistent*. *Four* out of *five* times, *no* meant *no*. But, *one* out of *five* times she "cracked." Maybe she had a good excuse—she was busy or stressed or distracted. In a moment of weakness, she blurted,



Weenie parents have a hard time saying "no."

"All right! Take some ginger snaps, go outside, and leave me alone! I'm tired of listening to your yammering!"

If my mother had cracked, she would have taught me the following lessons:

"When the going gets tough, the tough get yammering."

"If at first you don't succeed, yammer, yammer again."

"Never give up! Have hope! Today might be your lucky day."

When parents crack, they teach children that *yammering pays off*. Children learn that, by yammering, they can *get their way*. But first, they must wear their parents down by acting like brats.

The Irony of Consistency

The irony of consistency is that the closer you come to being consistent before you fail, the worse off you are. If the parent cracks easily, the child does not need to be a world-class yammerer in order to succeed. But, if the parent does *not* crack easily, the child must learn to play hardball. By making kids work hard in order to win, the parent inadvertently trains the kid to be both ruthless and persistent.

Consistency in the Classroom

Focus on Small Disruptions

In the classroom we will begin by focusing on the small everyday disruptions such as "talking to neighbors." We will do this for two reasons:

- **Small disruptions are more costly.** As we mentioned in previous chapters, small disruptions occur at a much higher rate in the classroom than large disruptions. Consequently, they account for the lion's share of lost learning time and teacher stress.

- **Big disruptions grow from small disruptions.** While a crisis can sometimes erupt from out of the blue, most big problems are just small problems that have been allowed to fester. When, for example, we see a seven-year-old acting like a tyrant, we strongly suspect that this child has been "getting away with murder" for quite some time. Similarly, when we see a student who is outrageous in the classroom, we suspect that the problem did not begin yesterday.

The most common disruption in the classroom, as we have mentioned earlier, is *talking to neighbors*. When you respond to goofing off in the classroom, you will be dealing with *talking to neighbors* eighty percent of the time.

Of course, different lesson formats have different rules. But, "talking to neighbors" serves well as our prototypical disruption because it is both common and simple, and it has all of the ingredients necessary for discussion.

Therefore, let's assume that, during the lesson under examination, students clearly understand that they are to be doing their own work. When the teacher looks up to see two students on the far side of the room chatting instead of working, it clearly represents goofing off.

Kind of Consistent?

There are no *degrees* of consistency. Consistency permits only two conditions:

- You are *consistent*.
- You are *inconsistent*.

Discipline Before Instruction

Let's deal with your *priorities* before we consider your actions. In the classroom, the following priority must govern your decision making at all times:

Discipline comes before instruction.

It is not optional. It is a cornerstone of effective management.

Placing discipline before instruction is something that most teachers would readily accept. After all, it's only logical. Does this make sense?

"If students are goofing off, they are certainly *not* doing your lesson."

How about this?

"Get your rules and routines straight at the *beginning* of the semester. If you don't, you'll be chasing after those kids for the next eighteen weeks.

Indeed, most teachers would agree, at least at a *logical* level, that discipline should come *before* instruction. Why, then, do so few teachers *act* that way.

The Moment Of Truth

A Difficult Choice

Beware! Weenieism can be far more subtle in the classroom than it is at home.

Let's imagine, for example, that you are helping a student, Robert, with a complex piece of work like a geometry proof. He is lost somewhere in the middle of the proof among the theorems and axioms and corollaries.

You have been working with Robert for a couple of minutes, and you are nearing closure. Given another *thirty seconds*, Robert will be able to progress on his own.

At this moment out of the corner of your eye you catch two students on the far side of the room *talking* instead of working. It is not a big disruption. It isn't even bothering other students nearby.

Now, be *utterly candid* with yourself as you imagine *what to do next*.

- Do you want to abort the teaching interaction in which you have invested several minutes and in which you are nearing closure? or,
- Do you want to finish helping Robert before you deal with the problem?

During training, a roomful of experienced teachers will respond in unison, "Finish helping Robert."

Of course you want to finish helping Robert! After all, you have made an *emotional* investment and an *intellectual* investment as well as an investment of *time*. You are *so close* to completion. Robert almost *has it*.

Consequently, most teachers will return to helping Robert. In the "moment of truth" most teachers will choose instruction over discipline.

The Students' Perspective

Now, let's look at this situation from the *students' perspective*. It is the beginning of the school year, and they are trying to figure out who you are.

**Discipline
comes before
instruction.**

The class just saw you make a choice. They saw you look up to observe two students goofing off, and then they saw you return to Robert.

From the students' perspective, answer this question:

"In this classroom, is discipline management on the *front* burner, or is discipline management on the *back* burner?"

You may as well make the following public announcement to the students:

"Class, do you remember what I said at the beginning of the school year about high standards and time-on-task. Well, as you know, *talk is cheap*.

"What you just saw was *reality*. As you may have noticed, when I have to choose between discipline and instruction, I will choose *instruction*. I find discipline management to be... oh, how can I say this... *inconvenient*. Consequently when I am busy with instruction, I will turn a *blind eye* to goofing off as long as it is not too bothersome.

"I would *like* for there to be no discipline problems, of course, but, as you can see, dealing with them is simply *not worth my time*. In spite of this, let me express my sincere hope that we will have an orderly and productive school year together."

The Horns of a Dilemma

When you look up to see one of your rules being broken, you are on the *horns of a dilemma*. If you act, your rules become reality. If you *fail* to act, your rules are nothing but hot air.

This is your *moment of truth*. Equivocation has a high price. If you waffle, you become a "weenie." A weenie is a magnet for brat behavior.

See and Then Act

Don't Think

Thinking when you should be acting is fatal. If the student has stepped over the line, you either do something about it or you "pull your punch."

It is too late to start thinking about what to do. You must know what to do.

Thinking at this juncture produces *dithering* instead of *doing*. To eliminate dithering, *don't think*. Discipline always come before instruction – period!

If you stop to think at this point, your thoughts will usually be rationalizations for staying with Robert. Here are some truly *irrelevant* thoughts that may come to mind.

- **How big is the disruption?** This is *irrelevant*. When you see unacceptable behavior, you either deal with it or not. The disruption will typically be small – *talking to neighbors* in most cases.
- **How important is the assignment?** This is also *irrelevant*. If the assignment were not important, you wouldn't be teaching it.

Of course the problem is small. *Of course* the lesson is important. *Of course* discipline management is inconvenient. But you cannot turn a blind eye to disruptions. No means no *every time*, or it means less than nothing. Stop dithering and do your job, or quit kidding yourself and admit that you really *are* a weenie.

Don't Consult Your Feelings

Discipline management is a game that you play out of your *head*, not out of your *gut*. Your boundaries coincide with your definition of unacceptable behavior. They have nothing to do with how you feel.

Feelings are inconstant by their very nature. If you respond based upon your feelings, you can *never* be consistent.

You cannot respond, for example, because you feel yourself "losing your patience." Your patience will be a function of:

- How much sleep you got last night.
- Whether you are upset about something else in your life like a sick child or a marital problem.
- What some other kid in class did five minutes ago.

You must, therefore, have mental clarity as to where your behavioral boundaries lie. Without *mental* clarity you cannot have *behavioral* clarity.

Classroom Rules

You Make the Rules

I don't make the rules for your classroom. *You* do. Different lesson formats have different rules. In spite of using *talking to neighbors* as our prototypical disruption, having a rule against it may make absolutely no sense for a given activity. Partner teaching, for example, bombs without it.

Classroom rules also vary from one setting to another. What works in your classroom may not work at Juvenile Hall.

But I have also observed enough schools to know how widely differing expectations can be from one teacher to

another in the same building. While rules may vary from place to place, it is dangerous to have them "up for grabs" – purely a matter of personal preference.

Far better for faculty members to discuss rules and reach consensus on the basics. The discussion among faculty members that leads to the development of the School Site Procedures Manual (chapter 12) typically spills over into classroom standards.

Teachers who have been part of this exercise have often described it as the most productive faculty activity of the entire school year. It is useful not only in consensus building but also in communicating school values to new faculty members.

Pick Your Battles

Green teachers often think of classroom rules as a kind of behavioral wish list. More experienced teachers know that each classroom rule comes with a high price tag attached.

If you are to be consistent, you must respond *every time* you see a rule infraction. Consistency, therefore, requires that you adhere to the following "rule of rules:"

*Never make a rule
that you are not willing to enforce
every time.*

Enforcement will always be an intrusion that requires you to stop what you are doing. Before you make a rule, therefore, imagine yourself enforcing it – *every time*. Then, ask yourself, "Is it worth the price?"

Without
mental clarity
you cannot have
behavioral clarity.

Firmness and Nurture

Dealing With Larry

When you set limits in the classroom, you are establishing behavioral boundaries for the students. You know from developmental psychology that children establish reality by testing boundaries. If the boundaries never change, testing extinguishes as the child accepts the limit as being part of his or her reality. If the boundaries change, the child keeps testing.

Many of your students will come from homes in which “no” does *not* mean “no.” Weenie parents create kids who will test your resolve to the limit because they are used to winning.

If they do not win, they will extinguish *very slowly* because they expect to win eventually. If you are *at all* inconsistent like their parents, these children will *never* extinguish.

Weenieism Can Sneak Up On You

Weenieism in the classroom can sneak up on you. While confrontations with Larry produces *drama*, typical goofing off produces *no drama* at all. It's usually just innocent looking chit-chat.

Since the challenge to your rules is both indirect and mild, it is seductively easy to turn a “blind eye” to the problem and just keep teaching. But, when you turn a “blind eye” to chit-chat, you allow *talking to neighbors* to self-reinforce. Don't be surprised when the problem reoccurs – and reoccurs – and reoccurs. When you have finally “had it” and intervene,

you will be attempting to suppress a behavior that you participated in building.

Inconsistency and Harshness

Green teachers who have not yet raised a family have a particularly hard time taking consistency as seriously as they should. Their primary focus is usually relationship building. Rule enforcement tends to take a back seat.

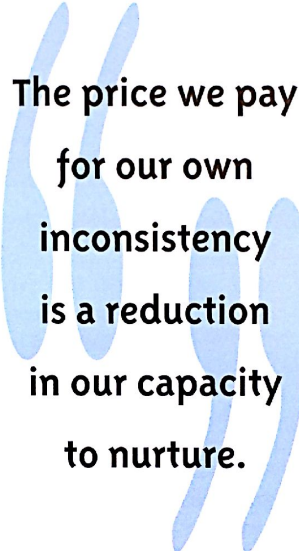
Teachers who have raised a family know all about “infantile omnipotence.” They have learned to combine *affection* with *firmness and consistency* in order to create stable boundaries. For teachers who have little experience with this balancing act, the notion that boundaries cannot move, that there are no “degrees of consistency”, seems overly rigid.

Nevertheless, your ability to be nurturant will ultimately be a function of your ability to be consistent. The management of behavior problems will follow one of two paths:

*If you are consistent,
you can use smaller and smaller
consequences to govern misbehavior.*

*But, if you are inconsistent,
you must use larger and larger
consequences to govern misbehavior.*

Inconsistency generates strife of increasing intensity. At some point, dealing with the same provocations from the same students over and over will become personal. In the final analysis, the price you pay for your own inconsistency is a reduction in your capacity to nurture.



The price we pay
for our own
inconsistency
is a reduction
in our capacity
to nurture.