Minimizing Off-Task Behavior and Discipline Problems

After I explained to one of my students that he would not pass physical education for the year, the student stormed out of my office and went right to the principal and exclaimed “How can he fail me? I haven’t been in class all year!” After about two seconds of thought the principal replied “Did you really think about what you just said?” To this day I don’t think the student has figured out why he failed.

—Kevin Czapor,
Upper Dublin High School, Washington, PA
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Wouldn’t it be great if we could just teach? No children misbehaving, no children off-task, every child eager to listen and learn. It would be, but that’s a dream. Even teachers who develop the management protocols described in the previous chapter still have some children who misbehave. The reality of teaching is that there are always going to be a few children who, for whatever reason, are going to march to the beat of a different drummer. The purpose of this chapter is to describe and analyze some of the ways teachers prevent off-task behavior.

As part of the introduction to this chapter, I want to emphasize that the techniques described here are typically necessary for only a few children in a class. Most children try to please the teacher, follow the rules, and work hard at the tasks. This assumes, of course, that the tasks are appropriate for the skill level of the children and are modified at appropriate times in the lesson. Activities or tasks that are too easy, too hard, or too protracted invite off-task behavior by the children.

My experience suggests that, when a class or child that is well-behaved most days becomes off-task, it is often my teaching that needs to be modified. Perhaps my
explanation was unclear, the task or activity was too hard or too easy, or perhaps something unique is going on in the classroom and the children are overexcited that day. Nevertheless, some children have a difficult time staying on-task day in and day out. As we well know, the tendency of these children toward misbehavior is often rooted in situations outside the school; nevertheless, we have the responsibility and the challenge of working with them in our classes.

After reading and understanding this chapter, the teacher will be able to

- Describe strategies that teachers use to minimize off-task behavior;
- Describe the general concepts of two discipline systems used in schools today: Canter's Assertive Discipline and Hellison's Levels of Affective Development;
- Analyze the role of parents, principals, and classroom teachers in the effective use of a discipline system; and
- Describe the feelings and strategies of teachers during discipline confrontations.

STRATEGIES FOR MINIMIZING OFF-TASK BEHAVIOR

Even teachers who effectively teach the behavior protocols described in chapter 3 are still going to have incidences of off-task behavior. Therefore, a teacher needs strategies that can minimize the misbehavior of children. Unfortunately, they are just strategies, not guarantees. Some of them succeed with some children some of the time. I wish I knew foolproof strategies that would be successful for all teachers all of the time, but I don't; no one does. Good teachers seem to have a repertoire of strategies that they use, sometimes consciously and sometimes without really thinking about them. They include back-to-the-wall, proximity control, with-it-ness, selective ignoring, overlapping, learning names, and positive pinpointing.

Back-to-the-Wall

One of the simplest strategies is referred to as back-to-the-wall. By standing on the outside of the boundaries (the wall in the gym or the edge of the playground), a teacher can better see what is going on in a class. When a teacher stands in the middle of a class, automatically about 50 percent of the children will be out of his sight; this means that he may not be able to see the off-task behavior until it has gone on for some time.

See topic 2

The CD-ROM that accompanies this text has a brief description of back-to-the-wall followed by a teacher demonstrating this technique.

The ability to detect off-task behavior as soon as it begins appears to be a characteristic of successful teachers. Immediate detection seems to prevent it from escalating. When it persists for several minutes, however, there is the potential for several children to become involved. Consequently, a relatively minor incident can escalate into a major incident, for example, as one child tries to wrestle a ball away from another child. This is known as the “ripple effect” (Kounin, 1970). When a teacher sees the beginning of such an incident, he can quickly prevent it from escalating because his targeting and timing are appropriate. He identifies the children correctly and quickly, thus preventing the behavior from developing into a crisis.
Proximity Control

One of the techniques the teacher may have used to prevent the ball-taking episode from escalating is proximity control—simply walking in the direction of the off-task child to let him know that she sees him and, by "the look," to let the child know he's off-task.

Veteran teachers know what I mean by "the look." It's a certain way a teacher looks at a child to say, "You're off-task; now get back to work." Obviously, however, a teacher needs to be close enough to the child so that the child can see the teacher's expressions.

Sometimes the look isn't even necessary. Simply standing by a group of children on the verge of becoming off-task is often enough to let them know you see them and expect them to remain focused.

Proximity control implies that a teacher is moving around the gym. Early in our careers we have a tendency to stand in one place. Although standing in one place may be more comfortable for the teacher, it's not as effective. Virtually without exception, good teachers move about the classroom, the gym, and the playground.

With-It-Ness

The strategies of back-to-the-wall and proximity control provide the impression to the children that a teacher has "with-it-ness"—"having eyes in the back of your head" (Kounin, 1970). When he began his series of research studies on discipline, Kounin hypothesized that teachers who had classes that were well-behaved and consistently on-task would be those who threatened children and, in fact, scared them into behaving. He discovered, however, that this wasn't true. The teachers who had the fewest discipline problems communicated to their classes in a calm and reassuring way that they knew what was going on in their classes; they knew the tricks, and the students shouldn't even bother to try them. By keeping their backs to the walls and quickly targeting and timing children tending towards off-task behavior, they were effective in convincing the children that indeed they were "with it."

With It and Without It

Remembering my days in elementary school, I can recall a sixth-grade teacher in particular who was "with it." She was friendly and warm, yet from the first day we could tell that she wasn't about to let us get away with anything. It was uncanny how she could identify children who were "off-task" types and, with looks and proximity control, keep them from misbehaving much of that year.

The next year, however, we had a teacher who was "without it," the same class of children quickly escalated into a rather rowdy group who were continually yelled at and threatened, but without much success. I am sure we were difficult to teach that year. We were essentially the same children, but, among other things, the teachers possessed different degrees of with-it-ness.

Selective Ignoring

Yesterday I watched a first-grade lesson focused on round, narrow, wide, and twisted shapes. At times the children were making shapes in their own space; at other times they were travelling around the gym in their shapes. Whenever the opportunity was given to travel, one of the children, Bryan, ran. My reaction and that of my college students who were also observing was to immediately want to stop Bryan from running. The teacher ignored him, however. As we watched I realized that Bryan really wasn't bothering other children. In fact, they ignored him also. Another teacher may have considered it off-task; Bryan's teacher didn't. And, after watching the entire lesson, I think she was right. Bryan was one of those "high-energy" children—some would label him hyperactive. He was doing what the
teacher asked but at a fast speed. The teacher obviously saw him but chose to selectively ignore him. It was an effective strategy in that lesson.

Selective ignoring works with many classes because the children in the class have been helped to understand why a child looks or acts a certain way. The ability to understand children who behave in ways outside the "normal" pattern of behavior has been one of the major advantages of mainstreaming in schools. As I observe children in a class who are assigned to work with other youngsters who have special needs, I am always warmed by their ability to understand the situation and their genuine willingness to help. This understanding doesn't happen automatically, however. Good teachers intentionally teach their classes to understand and work with these special children.

Nick's Insight

When my oldest son, Nick, was in fourth grade, I remember talking to him about some of the children in his class after I had observed his class. I remember commenting on one boy who was off-task constantly and obviously annoying the teacher. I commented to Nick that the boy who was off-task seemed to be a distraction to the class and a "troublemaker." I expected Nick to agree. He surprised me, however, by providing me with one of those glimpses into how children view the world when he said, "Dad, it's not all his fault. The teacher doesn't understand him. He's really a good guy if you give him a chance. She never really gave him one." I try to remember Nick's insight when a child misbehaves in one of my classes.

Overlapping

*Overlapping* is more of a teacher skill that is learned with practice than a strategy that can be easily learned, as is back-to-the-wall. It's the ability to focus on several things that are happening simultaneously and still maintain an intended direction.

Teachers are continually required to deal simultaneously with several children or situations. For example, the teacher nods his head "yes" at the child who has to go to the bathroom; smiles at the child who says "Watch me!"; puts his hand on the shoulder of the child who wants to talk to the teacher, signaling "wait a second"; and continues to observe the whole class as he determines whether to change the task or continue with it for several more minutes. Locke's vignette in chapter 1 is another illustration of how teachers need to develop the ability to overlap.
Overlapping is a pedagogical skill learned through experience. It’s a critical skill, however, because when we work with 30 or so children, there are times when we need to overlap unless we want the lesson to come to a complete stop. Obviously, by establishing routines and protocols we try to minimize the need for overlapping, yet there are times when it is needed.

Learning Names

Overlapping is a difficult technique to acquire; learning the names of the children is also difficult, but it is possible even for those teachers who have 600 or so children. One of the frustrating aspects of teaching is attempting to get the attention of a child whose name we don’t know. As we try to find out, we often halt the flow of the lesson as several children volunteer her name and then stop moving to watch what we have to say to her. When we know a youngster’s name, we can often speak it across the gym to let the child know that we see her and offer praise or remind her to get on-task.

Some teachers learn names with relative ease. For others it’s a struggle. We have all heard of name-learning techniques (e.g., alliteration, using the name several times in conversation, having the children tell you their names when they enter and leave the gym, and taking photos of the children) (Williams, 1995). PE Central (www.pecentral.org) also includes a number of suggestions for learning students’ names in the section entitled “Tips for the Beginning Teacher.” Increasingly, classroom teachers are making name tags for the younger children who then wear them to PE until the teacher has time to learn their names. Learning names is even more challenging for teachers who work in schools that have transient populations. Half of the children they teach in September will be gone in May, replaced with a new group of children. I wish I could suggest a magical, instant solution to this challenge of learning several hundred names, but I can’t. I do know, however, that it really helps to know the children’s names when we are trying to prevent off-task behavior.

Positive Pinpointing

When teachers identify one or more children and point them out to the rest of the class as modeling the desired behavior or skill, we call it pinpointing. This is a commonly employed strategy in elementary schools. “I like how Dawn and Ken are...”
standing quietly" is one example of positive pinpointing. My experience suggests that this technique is more effective with younger children who want to please the teacher. It can be overused, however. Some children seem to ignore it because the teacher is constantly talking about how well someone is doing something. As with any of these strategies, it can be effective depending upon the type of children, the way the strategy is used, and the frequency of use. Chapter 6 explains how pinpointing is used when teaching motor skills.

Many of these strategies or techniques seem to be innate characteristics of successful teachers. They are never taught or even discussed, yet they’re effectively used by many teachers. But not all teachers use them—especially in the beginning of their careers. It’s common, for example, to see a beginning teacher anchored in the same location for a lesson, or fail to see a child misbehave because the teacher’s back is turned to the child. As with so many of the skills discussed in this book, it’s easy to write about them and far more challenging to actually use them when teaching. I hope, however, that both beginning and experienced teachers will reflect on the subtle orchestration of teaching skills and strategies and their value for minimizing off-task behavior. No matter how well we use these strategies, however, some children will simply refuse to do what we ask. When that happens they’re not off-task; they are a discipline problem.

**DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS**

All teachers have students with discipline problems. Some of us minimize the problems, however. What strategies do successful teachers use to minimize discipline problems?

To begin with, they spend the first few days of the school year establishing the routines and teaching the management protocols described in chapter 3; they insist that the children learn these routines. They also use many of the strategies previously mentioned for minimizing off-task behavior.

**DISCIPLINE SYSTEMS**

In recent years systems designed to minimize misbehavior have become popular. Canter’s Assertive Discipline and Hellison’s Personal and Social Responsibility Models represent two of these systems. These systems are based on the assumption that some children will misbehave and that teachers need ways to deal effectively with misbehavior for the sake of the children who are misbehaving, and also for the other children in the class.

These systems are designed to be taught to the children from the beginning of the year and used as needed (Downing, 1996). This is in contrast to the teacher who hopes she doesn’t have a child misbehave and, when she does, tries to invent a solution on the spot. As any educator will attest, teachers who can continually invent ways to successfully deter off-task behavior amidst all the goings-on in a class can be found only in the movies and on television. The advantage of having a discipline system in place is that it provides teachers with a structure for making decisions related to discipline—rather than placing them in the unenviable situation of asking, “How can I get this child to stop doing that when I have 29 others who need my attention?”

**Assertive Discipline**

One of the most helpful trends in elementary schools across the United States has been the inception of schoolwide discipline plans. Assertive discipline is one
example of a popular, albeit controversial, schoolwide discipline plan (Canter, 1976; Hill, 1990; Moone, 1997; Sander, 1989). Art, music, and physical education teachers
find plans such as this one especially helpful because these instructors teach so many
classes each day and for relatively short periods of time. When there is a schoolwide
program in place, these teachers have a general idea of the expectations and
understanding that the children have been taught regarding behavior in other
classes. When a school is able to agree on the rules for behavior and the consequences
of misbehavior, it makes the atmosphere more consistent for the children and
somewhat easier for the specialists teachers because, at least in theory, they will need
to spend less time teaching the children their own discipline systems. The major
concepts of Canter’s Assertive Discipline Model are outlined in box 4.1.

I realize that simply adopting a schoolwide discipline plan doesn’t necessarily
mean that it will be uniformly enforced. Critical demandingness and teacher
expectancy (chapter 3) vary from one teacher to another, as do the children in a class.
The concept of schoolwide discipline heightens the chance that teachers in a school
will be more consistent with their rules and consequences, thereby providing a more
secure environment for the children, who thus know what to expect from different
teachers.

In addition to agreeing on how the children are expected to function throughout
the school, there is also agreement on the consequences for misbehavior. Box 4.2

BOX 4.1 CANTER’S ASSERTIVE DISCIPLINE MODEL: MAJOR CONCEPTS

1. All students can behave responsibly.
2. Firm control (not passive or hostile) is fair.
3. Reasonable expectations (rules, appropriate behavior, etc.) should be clearly
   communicated.
4. Teachers should expect appropriate behavior from students and receive administra-
   tive and parental support to stimulate it.
5. Appropriate behavior should be reinforced while inappropriate behavior should be
   met with logical consequences.
6. Logical consequences for not meeting expectations should be clearly communicated.
7. Consequences should be consistently reinforced without bias.
8. All verbal and nonverbal communication to students should be firm with definite
teacher-student eye contact.

9. Teachers should mentally practice expectations and consequences for consistent
   use with students.

Reprinted from Sanders, 1989.

BOX 4.2 CONSEQUENCES FOR MISBEHAVIOR

- 1st time a child breaks a rule—child is warned
- 2nd time a child breaks a rule—5-minute time-out
- 3rd time a child breaks a rule—10-minute time-out
- 4th time a child breaks a rule—teacher calls parents
- 5th time a child breaks a rule—child is sent to principal

Good behavior all week earns, for example, 10 minutes of “free-choice” time or a
tangible reward (e.g., smiley-face sticker).
provides an example of the consequences that are part of an assertive discipline (Hill, 1990).

In some schools the PE teacher will implement his own system of discipline. In other schools, where a schoolwide discipline system is in place, the PE teacher will provide a record of checks for misbehavior to the classroom teacher, who then adds them to her checks for the week. The use of bonus or free time on Friday is widespread, although some teachers, particularly with classes that tend toward misbehavior, use a daily plan rather than a weekly plan, allowing the children a few minutes at the end of a class to choose among several activities. Children who earned checks are not provided with the choice and are required to work on an activity chosen by the teacher.

**Time-Out**

Obviously not every teacher and every school uses a formalized discipline system. There are a number of other strategies teachers use to prevent misbehavior that may or may not be a part of an overall plan. Time-out, part of the assertive discipline system, is probably one of the most commonly used techniques in physical education outside of an actual discipline system. It is especially effective because of our subject matter: Some children may see time away from math or science as a bonus, but they enjoy physical activity, so time-out can be a rather potent technique.

Most teachers provide children with a warning first (Moone, 1997). For example, "If you talk again when I am talking, you will be in time-out." If the undesirable behavior happens again, the child is told to take a time-out. Borrowing from the assertive discipline approach, time-out is most effective when a teacher assumes that some children will be in time-out at various times during the year. They "teach" time-out at the beginning of the year, almost as one of the management protocols, so that the children clearly understand the process. Some teachers place time-out numbers on the walls. The misbehaving child is then told to take a time-out at number 4, for example. This prevents several children from getting together to chat as often happens when there is no designated time-out location and two or more children are timed-out at the same time.

Some teachers use a clock for a time-out. For example, the children are taught that they can return to the lesson after two minutes. Others provide paper and pencil on a clipboard and ask the children to write the reason they were placed in time-out (e.g., the rule they violated) before returning to the class. PE Central (www.pecentral.org) has several examples of written activities for youngsters to
complete when they are in time-out. They are contained in the section entitled “Paper and Pencil Assessments.”

Some teachers require the children to come to them and verbally explain why they were timed out before returning to class.

If a child receives a second time-out in the same lesson, many teachers simply require them to remain out of the lesson for the rest of the class. Although this may seem harsh, the fact is that often these are children who are so disruptive and demanding that the other children in the class, who are on-task and trying hard, are often shortchanged.

**Desirable Rewards and Undesirable Consequences**

When teachers choose to use a discipline system (such as assertive discipline) based on extrinsic rewards, it is important that the rewards be desirable for the children and the consequences, undesirable. Let me illustrate with several examples. Popcorn parties, in some instances, are desirable. I have been in schools, however, where the air is permeated with the smell of popping popcorn on Friday afternoons. My guess is that popcorn every Friday is not a very desirable reward—beyond perhaps the first few Fridays. It is almost taken for granted after a few weeks.

I have also observed teachers who use free time on Friday as a reward. Although this is motivating for some children, it seems to be more of a reward for the teacher than for the children. The children are frequently threatened with a loss of free time, but somehow part of Friday’s lesson is always free time. I also wonder how teachers can justify free time when there is much for the children to learn and so little time in which to learn it (chapter 2).

My observations tell me that popcorn and free time are obviously not effective when they are the only rewards. Some teachers create their own awards. The “golden sneaker” award is a favorite—an old sneaker spray-painted gold and mounted on a board.

In creating an award, the key is to give it value through the presentation. Perhaps this requires a bit of acting by the teacher, but for some it is effective. In addition to old sneakers, some teachers cleverly create awards from an old deflated ball, a rusty trophy, a whistle without its pea, a worn-out or knotted jump rope, or other equipment ready for discard. It’s the idea of a reward, more than the value of the item, that is important. Some teachers use stickers as a way of saying “good job”; others use nontoxic stamp pads with messages such as “Right on” or “Super kid,” which can be stamped on the back of a child’s hand.

The undesirable consequence that is probably the most effective is loss of time in physical education. One of the most successful ways this is used is when children who have received misbehavior checks are not permitted to participate in an activity that the children really enjoy. Parachute activities are often used with the younger children, and a group game with a cage ball is used for older children—with some of the children not allowed to participate in these activities because of their misbehavior during the day or week.

The important idea here is that, if a teacher is going to use a system of extrinsic rewards, the rewards must motivate the children if the system is going to succeed. If the rewards are ones that the children don’t really care about, then the system will not be very successful.

**Personal Social Responsibility Model**

Some teachers prefer intrinsic rewards for children (i.e., internally motivated rewards that are derived from working hard and getting along with others). They believe that children naturally want to do well and that extrinsic rewards are, over
the long term, counterproductive. These teachers want children to participate in and enjoy physical activity for its own sake, not because they can earn an extrinsic reward for participating.

The most popular “intrinsic motivation” system in physical education was developed by Don Hellison (1985; Hellison & Templin, 1991; Masser, 1990; Compagnone, 1995; Hartinger, 1997). Essentially, the model is designed to help children understand and practice self-responsibility. The motivating factor in his model is the innate desire of children to get along with others and take responsibility for their own behavior, rather than relying on a teacher to reward them for being good. As with other discipline plans, the model is clearly explained to the children, and they are encouraged to accept responsibility for their own behavior and to work with others. The model has five levels:

**Level 0: Irresponsibility.** At this level children are unable to take responsibility for their own behavior and typically interfere with others by belittling, intimidating, or verbally or physically abusing their classmates.

**Level 1: Self-control.** This is a level of minimal involvement. Children will do what the teacher asks without interfering with others. This is done with minimal prompting from the teacher, although in most instances children at this level appear to be simply “going through the motions.”

**Level 2: Involvement.** Children at this level become actively involved in the lessons. They try hard, avoid disturbing others, and genuinely take an interest in learning and improving.

**Level 3: Self-responsibility.** This level is the point at which children are encouraged to begin to take responsibility for their own learning. This implies that they need not work under direct supervision from the teacher and that they are able to make decisions independently about what they need to learn and how they might go about learning it. At this level children are often asked to design their own games, sequences, or dances in small groups. When children are not at this level, however, the challenge of working in groups to create their own versions of an activity is typically doomed to failure, as they spend more time arguing than moving.

**Level 4: Caring.** Children at this level go beyond simply working with others—they genuinely want to support and help others in the class. For example, children at this level are the ones who will volunteer to be a partner for a day with a child in the class who is unpopular, without being asked to do so by the teacher.

Figure 4.1 provides examples of the various levels (Masser, 1990). The different levels are exemplified at home, on the playground, in the classroom, and in physical education class.

Needless to say, this model requires more than simply explaining it to a class of children and then expecting that they will all want to work at level 4. As with the assertive discipline system, the different levels are explained to children at the beginning of the year and then used throughout as a way to encourage them to cooperate with the teacher and with other children. Some examples follow:

- Children are asked to select equipment. Teacher asks how level 0 persons would get their equipment. Level 1? Level 2? Level 3? Level 4? The children are then asked to walk over and get their equipment, showing the teacher the level they think they can work at (Masser, 1990).

- When the children are learning a new skill, the teacher asks how children at the various levels might practice. They are then encouraged to work at the upper levels
What's your level?

Level 0: Irresponsibility
Home: Blaming brothers or sisters for problems
Playground: Calling other students names
Classroom: Talking to friends when teacher is giving instructions
Physical education: Pushing and shoving others when selecting equipment

Level 1: Self-control
Home: Keeping self from hitting brother even though really mad at him
Playground: Standing and watching others play
Classroom: Waiting until appropriate time to talk with friends
Physical education: Practicing, but not all the time

Level 2: Involvement
Home: Helping to clean up supper dishes
Playground: Playing with others
Classroom: Listening and doing class work
Physical education: Trying new things without complaining and saying I can't

Level 3: Self-responsibility
Home: Cleaning room without being asked
Playground: Returning equipment during recess
Classroom: Doing a science project not a part of any assignment
Physical education: Undertaking to learn a new skill through resources outside the physical education class

Level 4: Caring
Home: Helping take care of a pet or younger child
Playground: Asking others (not just friends) to join them in play
Classroom: Helping another student with a math problem
Physical education: Willingly working with anyone in the class

Figure 4.1 What’s your level?

and complimented for doing so as a group, or they are pinpointed (chapters 4 and 6) (Masser, 1990).

- A misbehaving student is asked to sit out for a few minutes (time-out) and is told why the misbehavior is level 0. The child is invited to return to the class when he is able to tell the teacher what a level 1 behavior, or higher, would be like—and when he assures the teacher that he can participate at that level (Masser, 1990).

- A student complains about another student. The student with the complaint is asked to identify the level the other student is functioning at and is then asked for ways to deal with others functioning at that level (Masser, 1990).
If two students are fighting over equipment or use of space (level 1) they can be sent to the talking bench. They sit on the bench until they are ready to explain their solution to the teacher. Assuming the lesson is interesting, most of the time students will want to return quickly, so they will be eager to find a solution to their conflict (Hartinger, 1997).

Fourth- and fifth-grade children are asked to work in groups. Before beginning they discuss how children at level 4 would work in a group setting. The focus is on how to work with children who might display level 0 or 1 behavior (Masser, 1990).

**CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE SYSTEMS**

Whether a teacher chooses to adopt or adapt a discipline system based on extrinsic motivation (assertive discipline) or intrinsic motivation (levels of affective development), it seems that there are three important characteristics that contribute to the ultimate success or failure of the discipline system: The discipline system is carefully explained to the children at the beginning of the year; the teacher consistently adheres to the criteria; and the principal, classroom teachers, and parents are supportive.

**Developing a Clear Understanding**

When a discipline plan works, one of the reasons it works is that the children clearly understand its operation and the reasons for its existence. Typically, the system is introduced at the beginning of the year; it is explained thoroughly with examples and then practiced. At this time children are invited to ask questions and helped to understand why such a plan may be necessary. In either type of system, it helps to involve the children in the implementation of the plan so they truly understand why it is important and how it will be used.

In contrast, when a plan isn’t set in place from the beginning, misbehavior is a “judgment call” for the teacher: What should I do? How severe should I make the penalty for misbehavior? Can I explain level 0 in 30 seconds so the child will understand?

Think of the discipline system as similar to the system set up to deal with automobile parking violations. Decisions are made regarding the length of time one is permitted to park at a meter and the places where cars can and cannot be parked. Once these rules are established, consequences for noncompliance are determined.

In the assertive discipline model, the children are helped to understand clearly the consequences for misbehaving (box 4.2).

In the personal social responsibility model, the levels are explained along with examples (figure 4.1).

When a discipline plan is set in place and explained at the beginning of the year, the children can understand exactly what to expect—the violations and the consequences are spelled out. Many believe this helps prevent misbehavior.

**Consistency by the Teacher**

A second characteristic of a successful discipline plan is consistency. Once the protocols and rules have been established, the teacher needs to use the same standards from one day to the next. This is easy to say, yet so hard to do. Nevertheless, it’s important for the children to understand exactly what is expected.
There is a tendency in teaching toward slippage. We start off consistently enforcing the protocol, for example, that when the teacher says “stop,” equipment is placed on the floor. After a few lessons, however, there is a tendency to slack up. One child doesn’t put the ball down and we ignore it. Gradually, however, it becomes two or three children, then six. Slippage has crept in. Effective teachers prevent slippage by their consistency. Children quickly understand that the teacher is really going to enforce the rules as they were discussed at the beginning of the year.

65 MPH? Or Is It Really 72 MPH?
As I write this section on slippage, I am reminded of the 65-mph speed limit. Drivers seem to understand that the limit isn’t really 65 mph. The conventional wisdom in this part of the United States is that it’s really 72 mph. So that’s where we set our cruise control—until our radar detector sounds. Then we slow down to 65 mph. Children see their parents drive this way. The message is clear: There are rules, but they aren’t really what they say; they can be stretched. The same is true in our classes. We establish rules and then allow them to be stretched, that is, we allow slippage. It seems that the rule we post on the wall is meant to be negotiated (Tousignant & Siedentop, 1983). As teachers we determine whether and how much our rules can be stretched.

Role of the Principal and Classroom Teacher
Occasionally we find children who are unwilling, perhaps even unable, to sit out for a few minutes without disrupting the others in the class. The time-out doesn’t work; rewards and consequences aren’t effective either. In these instances the teacher has little choice but to actually remove the child from the class. When this happens the child’s classroom teacher, the principal, or a guidance counselor can be helpful in two ways. First, they may be aware of the reason the child misbehaves and provide effective strategies. They may also be helpful in creating a location in the school where the child can go when he is unable to function in a class without disrupting others.

Clearly we prefer to have these children in physical education classes. The reality, however, is that there are days and times when they may simply be unable to work in a group setting. Thus, a teacher has no choice but to remove them from the gym or playground. When this happens the cooperation of others in the school is vital.

Role of the Parents
In some schools parents can be counted on to help when their children are misbehaving. In these schools phone calls or letters home are very effective.

Post-It Technique
John Bowler who teaches in Dublin, Virginia, has children write their name, phone number, their misbehavior, and the date on a yellow Post-it note and then he puts it by the phone in his office for one week. If the child behaves for one week the note is thrown away. If the child misbehaves again, John calls the parent. Having the child fill out the note provides a clear warning of what will happen if the misbehavior reoccurs. This technique is highly effective for John and his students.

Some teachers make it a weekly practice to telephone the parents of several hard-working children and tell them how well their children are doing in physical education. These teachers also call the parents of misbehaving children. When possible, however, they try to call the parent again as soon as possible with “good
news,” that is, that the behavior in physical education has improved. This is a potent combination.

Whether a teacher decides to write letters or make telephone calls, it seems to be more effective when the teacher can be specific about the behavior of the child, citing specific protocols or rules that have been followed or broken. This is particularly true for the “bad news” phone calls.

Unfortunately, involving parents is not effective in every school setting. In certain schools the principal and teacher are forced to rely on the types of things they can do for a child during the school day because a parent cannot be counted on to work with a child in desirable ways. When parents can become involved in situations in which a child is chronically misbehaving, however, it can be very effective.

**THE DISCIPLINE CONFRONTATION**

The strategies discussed so far are designed to minimize and prevent discipline problems. Nevertheless, most teachers, even in ideal situations, will occasionally find themselves confronting a child who has misbehaved. At times, this can be upsetting for a teacher. Several strategies can make the discipline confrontation less unsettling and ultimately beneficial for both the teacher and the child (Cothran, 1998).

Try to remember that the child’s misbehavior is not personal. Try not to be upset. In fact, at times it’s wise to catch your breath, become centered, and then deal with the child.

These confrontations are often most successful when they are done in relative privacy. It’s not a good idea to holler across the gym at a child. Instead, walk over, call the child to the side, and then conduct a brief interaction. I prefer to give the other children a task so that they are active, rather than standing and watching the confrontation. This makes it easier on the child who is being confronted, especially when this child is older and more concerned with what his peers will think.

The most effective strategy is to calmly and quietly use the child’s name, explain the rule (protocol) she violated, and then pause. At times it may be wise to ask for student input. When we do ask the child if she has anything to say, it’s important to listen with respect and try to understand her view of the situation. With some children, however, it may be counterproductive to ask for their version of what happened. When to ask and when not to ask for input can be determined only as a teacher gets to know his children. In either case, when the interaction is finished, the
teacher concludes by telling the child the predetermined consequence of her behavior—a check, a time-out, a loss of free time.

Disciplining it seems to be more effective when a teacher has thought through the confrontation process ahead of time. Often, when we are upset or excited, anger enters into the confrontation, which makes it ultimately less productive than it might be under calmer circumstances. I don’t mean to suggest, however, that successful teachers never get angry. They do from time to time, but calm interactions seem to be far more effective than angry ones. Even though a child has misbehaved, we still want to preserve his dignity. Once the child’s feelings of hurt, anger, or frustration have somewhat dissipated, we want the child to understand that what he did was a violation of the rules, but that he is OK as a person.

**Assertive Communication**

Communicating effectively is always a challenge. This is especially true when we are angry or upset. Fernandez-Balboa (1990) suggests strategies that beginning teachers can use to assist them in communicating assertively to children when they misbehave:

1. Describe the behavior in a nonjudgmental way—"Jim, you are taking Mary’s equipment away from her.”

2. Express your feelings as a teacher—"I am annoyed because you haven’t been listening.”

3. Acknowledge the feelings of the child—"Are you . . . (frustrated, sad, angry)?”

4. Explain the effect the described behavior is having on you and the rest of the class—"When you talk when I am talking it distracts me and the others in the class.”

5. State your expectations for future behavior—"I expect you to listen, and not talk, when I am talking.” (pp. 51–52)

**SUMMARY**

Teachers who minimize off-task behavior and discipline problems do so largely because they have thought through a number of strategies that are effective for preventing problems from escalating into major confrontations. As they teach, they are constantly aware of off-task behavior and attempt to minimize it by employing teaching strategies that help keep children focused and on-task. In addition, they typically have implemented a discipline system that the children understand: the teacher’s expectations, the consequences of misbehavior, and the benefits of cooperating with the teacher and other children. Some discipline systems are based primarily on extrinsic motivation (e.g., Canter’s Assertive Discipline Model), and others are designed to emphasize the development of intrinsic motivation (e.g., Hellison’s Personal and Social Responsibility Model). Regardless of the type of discipline system that a teacher chooses, it is imperative that the teacher be consistent and rigorous in the implementation of the system while also respecting the dignity and feelings of the children in the class.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. This chapter describes a number of teaching strategies that teachers use to minimize off-task behavior and discipline problems. Think about your own teaching. Which strategies are most natural to you? Which ones may be less comfortable to use? Can you explain why?
2. Two discipline systems were selected as representative examples. Which of the two is more appealing? Why?

3. Remembering teachers you had as a student or teachers you know, are you able to think of ways these teachers used aspects of either of these systems? Do you recall how effective they were?

4. Think about the use of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for children and the reason that some teachers might favor one over the other. Create two scenarios—one featuring an extrinsic discipline system, the other an intrinsic discipline system—that might explain why the teachers in either scenario would use that system and not the other one.

5. If you have a videotape of you teaching a lesson, analyze the use of the following teaching skills: back-to-the-wall, proximity control, with-it-ness, selective ignoring, overlapping, and positive pinpointing. Reflect on the use of these skills and how they might help to minimize discipline problems if used differently.

6. From time to time teachers do get angry at a child or a class. Can you understand and explain the reasons for this?

7. What are the consequences of believing that children today are harder to teach than they were in the past? How might that belief be reflected in the way we deal with children who are off-task?

REFERENCES


