

# Discipline through Dignity and Hope for Challenging Youth

## Authoritative Input

■ Richard Curwin and Allen Mendler / *Discipline with Dignity*

**Dignity** refers to respect for life and oneself. *Discipline with Dignity* is designed to help teachers maintain a positive classroom learning environment by emphasizing student dignity and providing a genuine sense of hope to students who are otherwise likely to drop out of school. The approach offers no magical fix for behavior problems, but does provide tools that lead to solid, long-term solutions to chronic misbehavior, including violence. *Discipline with Dignity* is for use with all students, but in recent years Curwin and Mendler have determined that it is especially helpful in bringing about positive change in students considered to be difficult to manage.

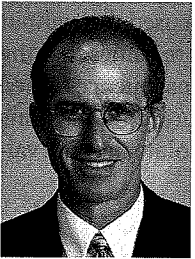
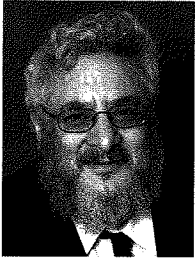
## CHAPTER PREVIEW

### Fundamental Hypothesis of Discipline with Dignity

Misbehavior does not become a significant problem in classrooms that maintain student dignity and provide genuine hope for and expectation of success.

### The Nature and Practice of Discipline with Dignity

Almost always, students who are particularly difficult to manage feel that their personal dignity is constantly under threat; moreover, they have little belief that they will ever be successful in school, or even that school has anything of value for them. However, most of these students can be reclaimed through tactics that enhance their dignity and provide a sense of hope for school success.



### About Richard Curwin and Allen Mendler

Richard Curwin and Allen Mendler write and consult widely in matters related to discipline and working with challenging youth. Curwin, a university professor and private consultant, began his teaching career in a seventh-grade class of boys whose behavior was seriously out of control. That experience led him toward a career specialization in school discipline. His articles have appeared in *Educational Leadership*; *Reclaiming Children and Youth*; *Instructor*, *Parenting*, and *Learning*. Mendler, a school psychologist and psychoeducational consultant, has worked extensively with students and teachers at all levels. His articles have appeared in many journals, including *Educational Leadership*, *Kappan*, *Learning*, *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, and *Reaching Today's Youth*.

Curwin and Mendler attracted national attention with their 1988 book *Discipline with Dignity*, which has been updated a number of times. In 1992 Curwin published *Rediscovering Hope: Our Greatest Teaching Strategy*, in which he explained how to improve the behavior of students who are difficult to control and who are otherwise likely to fail in school. In 1997 Curwin and Mendler published *As Tough as Necessary: Countering Violence, Aggression, and Hostility in Our Schools*, in which they provide suggestions for working with hostile, aggressive students. They followed in 1999 with *Discipline with Dignity for Challenging Youth*, designed to help teachers work productively with students with especially difficult behavioral problems. More recently, Allen Mendler published *Connecting with Students* (2001), and Richard Curwin published *Making Good Choices: Developing Responsibility, Respect, and Self-Discipline in Grades 4–9* (2003). Curwin and Mendler's website is [www.disciplineassociates.com](http://www.disciplineassociates.com).

Curwin and Mendler ask teachers first to understand that helping students learn to behave acceptably in school is an essential part of teaching. They urge teachers to do everything possible to instill hope and promise of success, especially in students who chronically misbehave. The way to do so is by always interacting with students in a helpful manner that preserves their dignity, while making sure that no discipline tactic interferes with their willingness to learn.

All students misbehave at one time or another, usually for inconsequential reasons, such as fun or expedience. Some misbehave for more serious reasons, however, including "gaining a measure of control over a system that has damaged their sense of dignity" (Curwin 1992, p. 49). They seek to experience that control by refusing to comply with teacher requests, arguing and talking back to the teacher, tapping pencils and dropping books, withdrawing from class activities, and overtly acting out hostility and aggression. As Curwin puts it, these students have found that they can't be good at learning but they can be very good at being bad, and that by doing so they can gratify their needs for attention and power. They are usually at risk for failure in school, and they usually find others like themselves with whom to bond, which encourages further misbehavior.

Teachers dread dealing with students whose behavior is so unacceptable they not only disrupt learning but threaten others. Such behavior makes teachers feel trapped and overwhelmed. Curwin and Mendler have provided realistic help for working with such students and for reducing behavior that is hostile, aggressive, and violent.

## **A Four-Phase Plan for Schools and Educators**

Curwin and Mendler suggest a four-phase plan for educators to help students move toward values-guided behavior. The plan can be used effectively in single classrooms, although Curwin and Mendler believe it produces even better results when used throughout the entire school. The four phases in the plan are (1) identifying the core values that the class or school holds and wishes to emphasize, (2) creating rules and consequences based on the core values identified, (3) modeling the values continually during interactions with students and staff members, and (4) using no interventions that violate the core values. Here are suggestions they offer within each of the four phases.

### **Identify the Core Values**

Faculty, staff, students, and parents work together to specify a set of **core values** that shows how they want individuals in the class or school to conduct themselves and relate to each other. A set of core values might include statements such as the following (1997, p. 24):

- School is a place where we solve our problems peacefully.
- School is a place where we protect and look out for one another, rather than hurt or attack one another.
- School is a place where we learn we are responsible for what we do.
- School is a place where we learn that "my way is not the only way."

### **Create Rules and Consequences**

Rules are needed to govern classroom behavior; those rules should be based on the school's stated values. Whereas the values state broad intentions, rules say exactly what one should and should not do. This can be seen in the following examples (1997, p. 31):

<b>Value</b>	<b>Rule</b>
School is a place where we protect and look out for one another, rather than hurt or attack one another.	No put-downs allowed.
School is a place where we solve our problems peacefully.	Keep your hands and feet to yourselves.

### **Model the Values**

It is essential that teachers and administrators continually model behaviors that are in keeping with the school values. Teachers must express their emotions nonviolently, use

positive strategies to resolve conflict with students, and walk away when they receive put-downs from students. Curwin and Mendler (1997, p. 32) suggest that teachers, individually or in staff meetings, write on paper how they want students to express their anger and how they want classroom conflicts to be resolved. Teachers should then teach their students these techniques and make sure they use them, as well.

### Use No Interventions that Violate Core Values

Teachers everywhere tend to use their past experiences when responding to student misbehavior. Their responses often take the form of threats, intimidation, and making examples of students. Responses of these types fail to model behavior consistent with school values and tend to produce further conflict. Threats, for example, destroy student comfort in the classroom. If carried out vengefully, they produce a backlash of resentment. If threats are not carried out, student behavior worsens, calling for still more dire threats, which, in turn, cannot be carried out. Students conclude that it is all right to threaten others, because they see the teacher modeling that behavior. Such a cycle is broken by showing students the dangers of threats and teaching them alternative behaviors.

The same applies to intimidation and using students as examples—familiar tactics of a majority of teachers years ago and still evident in many classrooms. When teachers intimidate students, students may cower (or may not); the students, in turn, become more likely to treat others in the same way. It is also self-defeating to reprimand one student as an example for others. The humiliation felt by the disciplined student produces a permanent effect. The primary goal of interventions is to help students learn more responsible behavior. This cannot be accomplished through hurtful tactics, but instead, through modeling positive, nonviolent behavior when intervening in student behavior, and through helping students use such behavior in their interactions with others.

## Preparing Oneself in Advance

It is helpful for teachers to prepare themselves in advance for misbehavior they might encounter. Curwin and Mendler suggest doing the following (1997, p. 71):

- Write down things students do or say that you find irritating.
- Determine why students do those things. What basic needs are they trying to meet? What motivates them?
- What do you presently do when students say or do irritating things?
- Are your current tactics effective in solving the problem?
- What response strategies can you think of that address the reasons for the irritating behavior while at the same time model behavior consistent with school values?
- Practice the strategies beforehand and then put them into practice at the next opportunity.

## Working with Students Who Are Behaviorally at Risk of Failure

**Behaviorally at risk** refers to students whose willful behavior severely inhibits learning and puts them in danger of failing in school. These are the students teachers consider to be out of control—turned off, angry, hostile, irresponsible, disruptive, or withdrawn. They are commonly said to have “attitude problems.” They make little effort to learn, disregard teacher requests and directions, and instigate trouble in the classroom.

The exact percentage of students considered to be behaviorally at risk is not known, but as of October 2000 in the United States, there were 612,900 public school students enrolled in alternative schools for students considered to be too dangerous or disruptive to remain in regular schools. That figure represented 1.3 percent of the public school population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001b). Most of those schools were at the secondary level. Some educators estimate that about 5 percent of all school students are probably behaviorally at risk of failure in school.

Richard Curwin and Allen Mendler (1992) have taken a special interest in these students. They say the students behave as they do because they have low self-concepts in relation to school and little or no hope of being successful there. They associate with and are reinforced by students similar to themselves. Curwin and Mendler emphasize that the term *at risk* refers solely to behavior, not to the nature of the student, saying, “It is what students do under the conditions they are in, not who they are, that puts them at risk” (Curwin 1992, p. xiii).

Students who are behaviorally at risk are difficult to control for several reasons. They usually, though not always, have a history of academic failure. Unable to maintain dignity through achievement, they protect themselves by withdrawing and acting as if they don’t care. They have learned that it feels better to misbehave than to follow rules that provide no payoff. Curwin (1992) illustrates this point.

Ask yourself, if you got a 56 on an important test, what would make you feel better about failing? Telling your friends, “I studied hard and was just too stupid to pass” or, “It was a stupid test anyway, and besides I hate that dumb class and that boring teacher?” (p. 49)

When their dignity has been repeatedly damaged in school, students make themselves feel better by lashing out at others. As they continue to misbehave, they find themselves systematically removed from opportunities to act responsibly. When they break rules, they are made to sit by themselves in isolation. When they fight, they are told to apologize and shake hands. In such cases they are taken out of the very situations in which they might learn to behave responsibly. Curwin (1992) makes the point as follows:

No one would tell a batter who was struggling at the plate that he could not participate in batting practice until he improved. No one would tell a poor reader that he could not look at any books until his reading improved. In the same way, no student can learn how to play in a playground by being removed from the playground, or how to learn time-management skills by being told when to schedule everything. Learning responsibility requires participation. (p. 50)

The importance of personal dignity in the lives of students who are at risk can hardly be overstated. In their book, *Discipline with Dignity* (2001), Curwin and Mendler point out that students with chronic behavior problems see themselves as losers and have stopped trying to gain acceptance in normal ways. In order to maintain a sense of dignity, those students tell themselves it is better to stop trying than to continue failing, and that it is better to be recognized as a troublemaker than be seen as stupid. Students try to protect their dignity at all costs. Teachers must take pains, therefore, to keep dignity intact and bolster it when possible. Curwin (1992) advises

We must . . . welcome high risk students as human beings. They come to school as whole people, not simply as brains waiting to be trained. Our assumptions about their social behavior need to include the understanding that their negative behaviors are based on protection and escape. They do the best they can with the skills they have under the adverse conditions they face. . . . When they are malicious, they believe, rightly or wrongly, that they are justified in defending themselves from attacks on their dignity. (p. 27)

It is very difficult for most teachers to remain understanding and helpful when students behave atrociously. A steady diet of defiant hostility makes many teachers become cynical, and they give up trying to help students. Some who face such behavior on a daily basis leave teaching because they don't feel its rewards justify the distress they must endure. However, Curwin and Mendler believe teachers can help most students who are at risk to become reasonably successful in school. What those students need is a renewed sense of hope and help and opportunity to learn how to accept responsibility. Teachers can often restore hope simply by treating students with respect while making instruction more interesting and worthwhile. Curwin and Mendler urge teachers to do the following:

- Always treat your students with dignity. Respect them as individuals, show concern for their needs, and understand their viewpoints.
- Don't allow your discipline tactics to interfere with student motivation. Any discipline technique that reduces motivation to learn is self-defeating.
- Emphasize responsibility rather than obedience. Obedience means "do as you are told." Responsibility means "make the best decision possible."

## Disciplining Students Who Are Difficult to Control

Traditional methods of discipline are relatively ineffective with students who are behaviorally at risk. These students have grown immune to scolding, lecturing, sarcasm, detention, extra writing assignments, isolation, names on the chalkboard, or trips to the principal's office. It does no good to tell them what they did wrong, nor does it help to grill them about their failure to do class work or follow rules. They already doubt their ability, and they know they don't want to follow rules. Sarcastic teacher remarks, because they attack student dignity, only make matters worse. Students who are at risk need no further humiliation. Punishment destroys their motivation to cooperate. They see no reason to commit to better ways of behaving and, therefore, do not achieve the results teachers hope for.

How, then, should teachers help these students learn to behave more responsibly? Curwin and Mendler set forth principles and approaches they consider significantly more effective than the discipline approaches normally used. They acknowledge that dealing with students who chronically break rules is never easy and admit that the success rate is far from perfect, but they claim it is possible to produce positive changes in 25 to 50 percent of students considered to be out of control. Curwin (1992, pp. 51–54) encourages teachers to base their discipline efforts on the following principles:

1. *Dealing with student behavior is an important part of teaching.* Most teachers do not want to deal with behavior problems, but their attitudes change when they adopt the conviction that being a professional means doing whatever they can to help each individual student. Teachers can look on misbehavior as an ideal opportunity for teaching responsibility. They should put as much effort into teaching good behavior as they put into teaching content.

2. *Always treat students with dignity.* Dignity is a basic need that is essential for healthy life. Its importance is preeminent. To treat students with dignity is to respect them as individuals, show concern for their needs, and understand their viewpoints. Effective discipline does not attack student dignity but instead offers hope. Curwin and Mendler advise teachers to ask themselves the following question when reacting to student misbehavior: "How would this strategy affect my dignity if a teacher did it to me?"

3. *Good discipline must not interfere with student motivation.* Any discipline technique is self-defeating if it reduces motivation to learn. Students who become involved in lessons cause few discipline problems. Poorly behaved students usually lack motivation to learn what is being offered them. They need encouragement and a reason to learn. Curwin suggests that teachers, when about to deal with misbehavior, ask themselves this question: "What will this technique do to motivation?"

4. *Responsibility is more important than obedience.* Curwin differentiates between obedience and responsibility as follows: Obedience means doing as you are told. Responsibility means making the best decision possible. Obedience is desirable in matters of health and safety, but when applied to most misbehavior it is a short-term solution against which students rebel. Responsibility grows, albeit slowly, as students engage in sorting out facts and making decisions. Teachers should regularly provide such opportunities.

## Rules and Consequences

Curwin and Mendler believe in establishing class rules and invoking consequences if students break those rules. Those consequences can be of three different types, called logical, conventional, and generic.

**Logical consequences** are those in which students must make right what they have done wrong. The consequence is logically related to the behavior. If they make a mess, they must clean it up. If they willfully damage material, they must replace it. If they speak hurtfully to others, they must practice speaking in ways that are not hurtful.

**Conventional consequences** are those commonly used by most teachers, such as time-out and removal from the room. These consequences are seldom logically related to the behavior in question; therefore, they should be modified to increase student commitment. When teachers invoke time-out, instead of banning the student for a specified length of time, they should say something like "You have chosen time-out. You may return to the group when you are ready to learn."

**Generic consequences** are reminders, warnings, choosing, and planning that are invoked when misbehavior is noted. Often, simple *reminders* are enough to stop misbehavior: "We need to get this work completed." *Choosing* allows students to select from three or four options a plan for improving their behavior. *Planning*, which Curwin (1992, p. 78) calls the most effective consequence that can be used for all rule violations, requires students to plan their own solution to a recurring behavior problem. Planning indicates that the teacher has faith in students' competence. That faith often engenders a degree of student commitment. The process involves the student's making a plan of positive action that specifies the steps the student will follow. It should be written, dated, and signed.

Curwin (1992, pp. 79–80) suggests a number of additional considerations related to consequences.

- Always implement a consequence when a rule is broken.
- Select the most appropriate consequence from the list of alternatives, taking into account the offense, situation, student involved, and the best means of helping that student.
- State the rule and consequence to the offending student. Nothing more need be said.
- Be private. Only the student(s) involved should hear.
- Do not embarrass the student.
- Do not think of the situation as win-lose. This is not a contest. Do not get involved in a power struggle.
- Control your anger. Be calm and speak quietly, but accept no excuses from the student.
- Sometimes it is best to let the student choose the consequence.

An **insubordination rule** should be established that will remove the student from the classroom should he or she refuse to accept an assigned consequence.

## Preventing Escalation

When teachers respond to student misbehavior, students often dig in their heels. A contest of wills then ensues, with neither side willing to back down. Curwin and Mendler remind teachers it is not their duty to win such contests but to do what they can to help the student. This requires keeping the channels open for rational discussion of problem behavior. That cannot be done if the teacher humiliates, angers, embarrasses, or demeans the student. This point is critical in working with high-risk students, who are predisposed to respond negatively. Curwin (1992) suggests that teachers do the following toward **preventing escalation** of incipient conflicts:



- Use active listening. Acknowledge and/or paraphrase what students say without agreeing, disagreeing, or expressing value judgment.
- Arrange to speak with the student later. Allow a time for cooling off. It is much easier to have positive discussions after anger has dissipated.
- Keep all communication as private as possible. Students do not want to lose face in front of their peers and so are unlikely to comply with public demands. Nor do teachers like to appear weak in front of the class. When communication is kept private, the chances for productive discussion are much better because egos are not so strongly on the line.
- If a student refuses to accept a consequence, invoke the insubordination rule. Don't use this provision until it is clear the student will not accept the consequence.

## Dealing with Aggression, Hostility, Violence, and Conflict

Curwin and Mendler note that students are becoming increasingly aggressive, hostile, and violent, and are doing so at an earlier age. Teenagers are two and a half times more likely to experience violence than people over age 20. Curwin and Mendler say the increase in violence has occurred in part because society has been rewarding and punishing students in school, home, and community rather than teaching them values—such as that it is wrong to intimidate others, hurt them physically, or destroy their property. A large number of students who use violence lack a sense of compassion or remorse and, thus, do not respond to normal discipline techniques. This makes it especially difficult for teachers to work with them productively.

Curwin and Mendler have addressed this problem in their 1997 book *As Tough As Necessary: Countering Violence, Aggression, and Hostility in Our Schools*. They point out that by “as tough as necessary” they do not mean a zero-tolerance stance. Instead, the mean using “a variety of ways to help aggressive, hostile, and violent children learn alternatives to hurting others” (p. ix). They contend that “behavior change among hardened, antisocial, and angry students cannot result simply from offering more love, caring, and opportunities for decision making” (p. 16). They say that if schools are to deal with violence, they must adopt schoolwide approaches that (1) teach students how, when threatened or frustrated, to make nonviolent choices that serve them more effectively than do violent choices; (2) model for students nonhostile ways of expressing anger, frustration, and impatience; and (3) emphasize the teaching of values that relate to cooperation, safety, altruism, and remorse.

Curwin and Mendler suggest several strategies for teachers and students to use when they encounter violence. These strategies are designed to help everyone calm down, decide how to proceed, and take positive steps. Teachers should teach the procedures to students and model them in practice. The following are a few of the many techniques suggested (1997, pp. 94–118):

- *Use the six-step solution.* (1) Stop and calm down. Wait a moment, take a deep breath, and relax. (2) Think. Quickly explore options and foresee what will happen if you use them. (3) Decide what you want to have happen. (4) Decide on a second solution in case the first doesn't work. (5) Carry out the solution you deem best. (6) Evaluate the results. Have you accomplished what you hoped? Will you use the tactic again in similar circumstances?
- *Solve my problem.* First, name the problem, indicating specifically what somebody has said or done. Second, say what you would like to have happen. Third, say what you will do to make those things happen. Fourth, make a backup plan to use if the first one doesn't work. Fifth, carry out the plan.
- *Learn to have patience.* As we grow up we learn that our needs can't always be met when we'd like, and that often we have to wait. If we don't learn to have patience, we will feel frustrated and angry because we are not getting what we want when we want it. Learning to be patient requires practice in such areas as walking away from a fight, waiting in line with a smile, and remaining calm when somebody cuts in line.
- *Wear an invisible shield.* Pretend you are wearing an invisible shield that deflects all bad thoughts and unkind words. It makes you immune to them. You cannot be hurt as long as you are wearing it.
- *Use words that work.* Instead of being provoked into retaliation, practice the following to stop almost all attacks against you: (1) speaking politely, using words such as *please* and *thank you*; (2) asking if you have done something that has upset the other person; and (3) apologizing if you have offended the person.
- *Plan for confrontations.* List five situations you recall in which people got into a dispute. Next to each, write down strategies you think would bring the situation calmly to a close. Practice what you would say and do if you found yourself in one of these situations.

Teachers who agree with approaches to deter violence still ask the legitimate question, "What, specifically, do I do when . . . ?" In answer to that question, Curwin and Mendler provide many concrete suggestions concerning the best teacher responses when students misbehave, such as (1997, p. 66)

- Use privacy, eye contact, and proximity when possible. Speak privately and quietly with the students. This preserves their dignity and takes away the likelihood of their fighting back.
- Indicate to the student politely but clearly what you want. Use the words *please* and *thank you* (e.g., "Bill, please go to Mr. Keene's room. There's a seat there for you. Come back when you are ready to learn. I hope that doesn't take very long. Thank you, Bill.")
- Tell the student that you see a power struggle brewing that will not be good for anyone. Defer discussion to a later time. (e.g., "Juan, you are angry and so am I. Rather than have a dispute now, let's calm down and talk later. I'm sure we can help each other out after we cool off. Thanks a lot.")

## Dealing with Bullying and Hate Crimes

Note: Whereas most of the contents of this chapter are drawn from the works of Curwin and Mendler, the information in this section comes mainly from Barbara Coloroso (2003) and John Hoover and Pam Stenhjem (2003).

Bullying and hate crimes seldom put the perpetrators in danger of failing in school, but they often have devastating effects on students and seriously trouble teachers. **Bullying** is defined as intentionally and repeatedly committing hurtful acts against others. It is a daily occurrence in most schools. It may consist of physical aggression, sexual aggression, name-calling, threatening, taunting, intimidating, or shunning. Four kinds of bullying are common:

1. *Physical bullying.* Including punching, poking, strangling, hair pulling, beating, biting, kicking, and excessive tickling.
2. *Verbal bullying.* Including hurtful name-calling, teasing, and gossip.
3. *Emotional bullying.* Including rejecting; terrorizing; extorting; defaming; humiliating; blackmailing; rating/ranking of personal characteristics such as race, disability, ethnicity, or perceived sexual orientation; manipulating friendships; isolating; ostracizing; and exerting peer pressure.
4. *Sexual bullying.* Including many of the actions listed above as well as exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual propositioning, sexual harassment, physical contact, and sexual assault.

Among middle school students, one in four is bullied on a regular basis, while one in five admits to bullying others. About one in seven says he or she experienced severe reactions to the abuse.

Acts of bullying usually occur away from the eyes of teachers or other responsible adults. As perpetrators go undetected, a climate of fear develops that affects victims adversely. Grades may suffer because attention is deflected away from learning. Fear may lead to absenteeism, truancy, or dropping out. If the problem persists, victims occasionally resort to drastic measures, such as fighting back, carrying weapons, and occasionally suicide.

Bystanders and peers of victims can suffer harmful effects as well. They may be afraid to associate with the victim for fear of lowering their own status or of receiving retribution from the bully. They may not report bullying incidents because they do not want to be called a snitch, a tattler, or an informer. Some experience feelings of guilt or helplessness for not standing up to the bully on behalf of their classmate. They may feel unsafe, with loss of control and inability to take action.

**Hate crimes** are similar to bullying, but are related to a dislike of other races, ethnic groups, or religions. They typically involve intimidation, harassment, bigoted slurs or epithets, force or threat of force, and vandalism.

The incidence and effects of bullying and hate crimes are grossly underreported. Educators, family members, and children concerned with violence prevention must be

concerned with hate crimes and their linkage to other violent behaviors. Excellent suggestions for limiting and dealing with bullying and hate crimes are found in *Preventing Bullying: A Manual for Schools and Communities*. (U.S. Department of Education, 1998), and in Barbara Coloroso's 2003 book, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander: How Parents and Teachers Can Break the Cycle of Violence*. Here are a few of the many suggestions provided in those two resources.

- Schedule regular classroom meetings during which students and teachers engage in discussion, role-playing, and other activities to reduce bullying and hate crimes.
- Involve parents or guardians of bullies and victims of bullying and hate crimes. Listen receptively to family members who report bullying. Establish procedures whereby such reports are investigated and resolved expeditiously.
- Form friendship groups or other supports for students who are being victimized by bullying or hate crimes.
- Closely supervise students on the grounds and in classrooms, hallways, restrooms, cafeterias, and other areas where bullying occurs. Immediately intervene in all bullying incidents.
- Post and publicize clear behavior standards, including rules against bullying, for all students. Consistently and fairly enforce such standards.
- Establish a confidential reporting system that allows students to report victimization. Keep records of the incidents.
- Provide students with opportunities to talk about bullying and hate crimes. Enlist their support in defining bullying as unacceptable behavior.
- Involve students in establishing classroom rules against bullying. Such rules may include a commitment from the teacher not to ignore incidents of bullying.
- Develop an action plan to ensure that students know what to do when they observe an episode of bullying.
- Don't try to mediate a bullying situation. The difference in power between victims and bullies may cause victims to feel further victimized by the process.

## Helping Students Regain Hope

Teachers can do a great deal to help students who are victimized or at risk regain a *sense of hope*. Hope is the belief that things will be better in the future. It inspires us, provides courage and incentive to overcome barriers, and helps us live more meaningfully. Students who are behaviorally at risk have, for the most part, lost hope that education will serve them. Curwin and Mendler contend that such students can be helped to regain hope and that as they do so their behavior will improve. This can be accomplished, they say, by making learning much more interesting and worthwhile. If students are to get involved in the learning process, they need something to hope for, something that will make their efforts seem worthwhile. Learning activities become successful when students see they build competence in matters the students consider important (Curwin 1992, p. 25).

Learning must not only be made attractive but, as mentioned, must bring success as well. Students who are behaviorally at risk will not persevere unless successful, despite the initial attractiveness of the topic. To ensure success, teachers can explore ways to redesign the curriculum, encourage different ways of thinking, provide for various learning styles and sensory modalities, allow for creativity and artistic expression, and use grading systems that provide encouraging feedback without damaging the students' willingness to try.

## **Motivating Students Who Are Difficult to Manage**

There is no set of techniques that automatically motivate students who are difficult to manage. Certain tactics, however, can yield positive results for many. Students who are behaviorally at risk have the same general needs and interests as other students, but they have encountered so much failure that they have turned to resistance and misbehavior to bolster their egos. Curwin (1992, pp. 130–144) makes the following suggestions for increasing motivation among all students, and especially those who are behaviorally at risk:

- Select for your lessons as many topics as you can that have personal importance and relevance to the students.
- Set up authentic learning goals—goals that lead to genuine competence that students can display and be proud of.
- Help students interact with the topics in ways that are congruent with their interests and values.
- Involve students actively in lessons. Allow them to use their senses, move about, and talk. Make the lessons as much fun as possible. Lessons needn't be easy if they are important and enjoyable.
- Give students numerous opportunities to take risks and make decisions without fear of failure.
- Show your own genuine energy and interest in the topics being studied. Show that you enjoy working with students. Try to connect personally with them as individuals.
- Each day, do at least one activity that you love. Show pride in your knowledge and ability to convey it to your students. Don't be reluctant to ham it up.
- Make your class activities events students look forward to. Make them wonder what might happen next.

## **Making Changes in Yourself**

Most teachers have to work at times with students who are unusually defiant, hostile, stubborn, offensive, or unmotivated. To help those teachers be more successful, Curwin and Mendler (1999) developed an approach called Dignity with Discipline for Challenging Youth. A cornerstone of the approach is helping teachers make changes *in themselves* that enable them better to meet the needs of their students. You have seen that Discipline with Dignity urges teachers to treat all students in a dignified manner while emphasizing responsibility. For working with challenging students, Curwin and Mendler add or reemphasize these suggestions:

- Adopt the stance that teachers are responsible for teaching all students and that all students are worthy of our best effort.
- Take comfort in knowing that you can help difficult students move toward better behavior in all aspects of life.
- Think of discipline as instruction for such behavior change.
- Learn to identify the reasons for misbehavior and address those reasons in your classes by teaching students to identify and deal with them.
- Develop a repertoire of effective discipline strategies and use them patiently and persistently.
- Develop discipline tactics for each of three categories: *crisis* (e.g., fights), *short term* (stopping misbehavior while preserving dignity of teacher and student), and *long term* (working to meet the needs of students over time). Effective crisis strategies call for specific plans of action you will take when crises arise. Short-term strategies include I-messages, PEP (privacy, eye contact, proximity), PEP notes or cards with words or phrases of appreciation or correction, privacy 3-step (privately set a limit, offer a choice, or give a consequence), and LAAD tactics (listening, acknowledging, agreeing, deferring action).
- Remove or limit the causes of misbehavior.
- Use affirmative rather than negative labels (e.g., “sticks up for himself” rather than “defiant,” or “has yet to find the value in lessons” rather than “lazy”).
- Create a caring classroom.
- Teach students self-control.
- Teach students to have concern for others.
- Set clearly defined limits on behavior.
- Teach conflict-resolution skills that students can use.
- Help students network with peers, older students, staff members, volunteers, and mentors.
- Always look for a common ground when dealing with troublesome students.
- Maintain the conviction that all students can change.
- Accept the challenge to stay personally involved with each student without taking personally any of their obnoxious, irritating, disruptive, or hurtful behavior.
- Remember that 70 percent of school misbehavior has its roots at home rather than at school and it is our obligation to break the cycle of hostility and aggression by not retaliating in kind.
- Always strive for responsible student behavior rather than mere obedience. Do this by establishing sensible limits on behavior and allowing students choices within these limits, such as writing or drawing as a way of expressing anger. Help students learn from the consequences of their behavior and in the process develop a commitment to change. In all cases, place more emphasis on motivation than on discipline.
- Use tactics that tend to overcome student resistance. Such tactics include personal interest, personal interaction, kindness, helpfulness, encouragement, acknowledgment of effort, and use of challenge rather than threat. Evaluate each strategy you consider against the following:

- Does it promote dignity or humiliation?
- Does it teach responsibility or obedience?
- Does it motivate students to learn?
- Does it foster commitment?

## Putting Curwin and Mendler's Ideas into Practice

Suppose you teach a class that contains several chronically misbehaving students, and you feel the Curwin and Mendler model can help you work with them more effectively. How do you make their suggestions operational? To begin, base your efforts on the following four principles:

1. *Student dignity must always be preserved.* When faced with threat, students, especially those who chronically misbehave, use antisocial behavior to counter it. You must guard against threatening students' dignity, even when they threaten yours.
2. *Dealing with misbehavior is one of the most important parts of teaching.* You are in the classroom to help your students. Those whose behavior puts them at risk of failure especially need your help, though their behavior may suggest that they want nothing to do with you. The best thing you can do for them is find ways to encourage prosocial behavior.
3. *Lasting results are achieved only over time.* There are no quick-fix solutions to chronic misbehavior, but by finding ways to motivate students and help them learn, you will enable many to make genuine improvement.
4. *Responsibility is more important than obedience.* You must be willing to put students into situations where they can make decisions about matters that concern them, be willing to allow them to fail, and then help them try again. progressively, they will learn to behave in ways that are best for themselves and others.

Mendler and Curwin (1999 pp. 13–16) further identify twelve points that provide functionality to their Discipline with Dignity.

1. Let students know what you need.
2. Provide instruction at levels that match students' abilities.
3. Listen to what students are thinking and feeling.
4. Use humor.
5. Vary your style of presentation.
6. Offer choices.
7. Refuse to accept excuses.
8. Legitimize behavior you cannot stop.
9. Use hugs and pats when communicating with students.
10. Be responsible for yourself and allow students to be responsible for themselves.
11. Accept that you will not be successful in helping every student.
12. Start fresh every day.

As for specific actions, when you first meet your students, spend as much time as necessary discussing goals for the class, interesting topics and activities you will provide, and class behavior that will enhance enjoyment and accomplishment for everyone. In those discussions, class rules and consequences should be agreed to. It is important that students contribute to those decisions and agree to abide by them. Then provide lessons that are structured to keep students active while allowing success. Emphasize topics and activities that students find interesting, rather than trying to drag the class perfunctorily through the standard curriculum. Display your own energy, enjoyment of learning, and pride in teaching. They will affect students positively and your willingness to help students without confrontation will slowly win them over.

Curwin and Mendler (2005) want you to remember and practice the following:

1. The most effective discipline technique at your disposal is making every student feel welcome and important.
2. Spend plenty of time at the beginning helping students get to know you, understand the nature and value of the class, and understand how they are expected to behave.
3. When students withdraw, give them an even bigger invitation.
4. Discipline responses require a two-stage approach: stabilize the behavior and teach behaviors that bring greater success.
5. Model ways of expressing anger effectively.
6. When you take something away from students, give them something back.
7. Eventually you must face students who misbehave. At that time, provide them limits and choices.

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### KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS EMPHASIZED IN THIS CHAPTER

dignity  
core values  
behaviorally at risk  
logical consequences

conventional consequences  
generic consequences  
insubordination rule  
preventing escalation

violence  
bullying  
hate crimes  
sense of hope

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### SELECTED SEVEN—SUMMARY SUGGESTIONS FROM CURWIN AND MENDLER

1. Safeguard and support student dignity in all class matters. Students make every effort to preserve dignity, and those efforts sometimes become misbehavior.
2. Do what you can to foster students' sense of hope that they will benefit from education. Students who have lost hope usually don't care how they behave.
3. Approach discipline as a very important part of teaching. It can teach students how to conduct themselves in ways that bring success in life.
4. Work toward long-term solutions to behavior problems. Short-term solutions are rarely effective.
5. Focus on student responsibility, not obedience, as the primary goal of discipline.
6. Use personal attention and good teaching as the major avenues to success with students who are chronically disruptive.
7. Prepare yourself to respond effectively to students who are hostile, disobedient, and inconsiderate.