

Moral Classroom, Moral Children: Creating a Constructivist Atmosphere in Early Education

Rheta DeVries & Betty Zan

Copyright © 1994, Rheta DeVries & Betty Zan.

DeVries, R. & Zan, B. (1994). Moral classrooms, moral children: Creating a constructivist atmosphere in early education. New York: Teacher's College Press.

CHAPTER 10

COOPERATIVE ALTERNATIVES TO DISCIPLINE

"Discipline" usually refers to methods of controlling and punishing children in order to socialize them. A dictionary (Morris, 1973) definition of the verb discipline lists two usages, including (1) "to train by instruction to control; teach to obey or accept authority," and (2) to punish or penalized." As these usages imply that adults do something to children, we therefore say that we do not "discipline" children. Rather, we work with children as they gradually construct their own convictions about relations with others. Construction, not instruction, is our goal for children. Moreover, we do not "train" children in obedient self-control. As discussed in chapter 3, autonomous self-regulation is our goal rather than obedience to authority.

This does not mean, of course, that children in constructivist classrooms are allowed to "run wild." Certainly, teachers must develop strategies for managing a classroom of children and coping with inevitable breakdowns in cooperation. Constructivist teachers are not passive. On the contrary! Constructivist teachers are highly active in their efforts to facilitate children's self-regulations. Their activity, however, does not take unilateral forms, to enable children to construct convictions and follow their own social and moral rules that are independent of adult coercion. Children's self-constructed social and moral rules are rooted in their everyday personal experiences. These personal experiences with peers and adults lead them to construct cause-effect relations between their actions and the reactions of others.

What we mean by "discipline" through cooperation is that the teacher co-operates in terms of the child's point of view. (The hyphen in "co-operates" is intended to emphasize the operation in terms of the child's perspective.) That is, the teacher establishes an atmosphere in which children feel that the teacher cares for them, enjoys being with them, and respects them by taking their feelings, interests, and ideas

into account. When children experience the teacher's cooperation with them, they are likely to be willing to cooperate with them, they are likely to be willing to cooperate with the teacher and with each other.

In this chapter, we take up the question of the role of personal experience in social and moral development. Piaget's distinction between two types of sanctions is presented, with examples. Finally, we suggest guidelines for implementing constructivist alternatives to discipline.

THE ROLE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN SOCIAL AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

The challenge of socializing children is to figure out how to help them control impulses, think beyond the here and now, and become able to reflect on consequences of their actions. This involves decentering to consider views and feelings of others. The alternatives to discipline that we discuss in this chapter are organic in their integration of children's personal, social and moral concerns in daily living in the classroom.

In his research on children's moral judgment, Piaget (1932/1965) pointed out that children can often reason at higher level when they focus on their own experiences instead of hypothetical situations. In personal experiences, children are more likely to realize that their own intentions are relevant to judgments of their actions. It seems likely, then, that it is through personal experiences that children may first begin to consider the motivations behind actions. By so doing, they begin to consider the motivations behind actions. By so doing, they begin to move beyond a view of others as objects to a view of others as having ideas and feelings. In constructivist education, we therefore advocate an emphasis on children's personal experiences for fostering social and moral development. These personal experiences occur in a natural context where children choose and pursue their interest.

Two Types of Sanctions

In discussing how adults deal with children's misdeeds, Piaget (1932/1965) distinguished between expiatory and reciprocity sanctions, described below.

Expiatory or Punitive Sanctions

Piaget described expiatory sanctions as reacting to transgressions with coercion and painful punishment. Expiatory sanctions are arbitrary in the sense that "there is no relation between the content of the guilty act and the nature of its punishment All that matters is that a due proportion should be kept between the suffering inflicted and

the gravity of the misdeed" (p. 205) Expiatory sanctions are intended to make the child suffer.

Expiatory or punitive sanctions, being arbitrary, convey revenge or vindictiveness. Some people think that making the child suffer is a preventive measure. Piaget (1932/1965) found, however, that older children view such punishments as ineffective and as simply making "the offender insensitive and coldly calculating" (p. 225). The attitude is "Daddy will punish me, but he won't do anything afterwards!" (p. 225). Piaget further commented, "How often, indeed, one sees children stoically bearing their punishment because they have decided beforehand to endure it rather than give in" (p. 225). One of us (BZ) was told the story of a teenager who had been forbidden by her parents to get her ear pierced. One weekend when her parents were out of town, she had a friend pierce her ears. When her parents returned and saw her ears, they were furious. Her punishment was to do the family ironing for 6 months (and this before permanent press!). Some 25 years later, she still insists that it was worth the punishment.

Expiatory punishments include spanking, making the child stand in a corner, and making the child write "I will not ____" 100 times. Humiliating children and chastising them in an emotionally overwhelming way are also expiatory. Any punishment designed to make the child suffer falls in this category.

Piaget found that young children believe that punishment is necessary and just, and the sterner, the better. They believe that the punishment invoked should be related quantitatively to the misdeed. Older children, in contrast, do not assess the value of punishment in terms of its severity. Instead, they believe that punishment for the purpose of making a wrongdoer suffer does not make sense. They believe that sanctions by reciprocity are more fair and more effective. Constructivist teachers agree with these children. We do not punish children. Instead, constructivist teachers invoke sanctions having the characteristic of reciprocity.

Reciprocity Sanctions

While expiatory sanctions are properly termed punishments, this is not the case for sanctions by reciprocity. Unfortunately, the English translator of Piaget's *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932-1965) translated Sanctions as punishments. Rather than viewing reciprocity sanctions as punishments, we recommend thinking of these as consequences. In contrast to expiatory sanctions, sanctions by reciprocity emphasize the social bond broken by a child's misdeed. All misdeeds occur in a social context and involve social relationships that are disrupted in some way as a result of the misdeed. When materials are misused or broken, others who enjoy the use of the materials are deprived of that use and may be angry or sad. When someone lies, others

may feel that they no longer can trust the one who told the lie. A rift occurs in the social bond that requires repair. When this is the case, the teacher only needs to call attention to the consequence of the break in social relations. Piaget points out that "Censure no longer needs to be emphasized by means of painful punishment: it acts with full force in so far as the measures taken by way of reciprocity make the transgressor realize the significance of his misdeeds" (p. 206)

For a sanction to be effective, the child must value the social bond and wish it to be restored. Thus, the close personal relationships between constructivist and teachers and children provide an important foundation for the effective use of reciprocity sanctions. Similarly, children's relations with one another are also crucial to the effectiveness of reciprocity sanctions.

Sanctions by reciprocity have in common the communication of a break in a social bond such as disappointment, anger or loss of trust. That is, mutual good will in a relationship has been interrupted. In a sanction by reciprocity, the person wronged responds to offense or injury by withdrawing trust or goodwill. The person wronged clearly signals that mutuality is disrupted and that the wrongdoer can no longer enjoy the pleasures and advantages of the former relationship. To reestablish the former mutuality, the wrongdoer must act to compensate the bad feeling and restore the relationship.

Piaget (1932/1965) discussed six types of reciprocity sanctions that provide a useful way of thinking about how to respond to classroom transgressions. Each is described below, with examples. The reader should keep in mind that any of these sanctions by reciprocity may be implemented in a punitive way that short-circuits the reciprocity and turns it into punishment. In addition, children may still interpret reciprocity sanctions as expiatory. Therefore, great care must be taken in invoking these sanctions. Sometimes, however, despite a teacher's best efforts, a child may experience a reciprocity sanction as unfair.

Sanctions by reciprocity include natural and logical consequences. Logical consequences include restitution, depriving the transgressor of the thing misused, exclusion, doing to the child what he has done, and censure.

Natural Consequences

Natural consequences result directly from actions. These take on a social meaning when the transgressor knows that the social group also suffers the consequences. If pages are torn from a book, the natural consequence is that no one can read it. If carelessness results in damaged or lost game pieces, the game is less enjoyable to use. If you talk and don't listen to the introduction of activities at group time, you won't

know what you can do . If you leave the tops off the colored markers, they dry up and no one can use them. In chapter 12, we describe how a teacher let children experience the natural consequence of not cleaning up their toys and materials. The room was a mess when they came in the next day! No one enjoyed this, and most children began to take clean-up more seriously, reminding each other and helping each other.

Restitution

Restitution means paying for, repairing, or replacing a broken or stolen object in order to restore the situation prior to the misdeed. H, for example, a kindergarten child, brought a new dinosaur to the class to replace the one whose tail he had bitten off. K, who tore E's picture, repaired it and gave it to her. Actions taken to repair a broken relationship are also restitutions. Apologies, when freely offered in a spirit of contrition, can be a form of restitution. While constructivist teachers never require apologies (see chapter 5), they rejoice when they witness sincere requests for forgiveness as a sign that children recognize how their own actions affect others' feelings toward them. In chapter 5, we suggest how restitutions are sometimes appropriate in conflicts.

Depriving the Transgressor of the Thing Misused

Depriving the child of objects and opportunities when these are abused can help the child construct attitudes of responsibility. Examples of this type of consequence include asking a child to find another activity when he or she misuses materials. In the Inventor kindergarten class, Coreen asked whether children who do not clean up should be allowed to use the materials. A (a 5-year-old) responded, "No, 'cause I'm not sure if I can trust the kids tomorrow to clean up their activities. It's like when E took away the _____ and went away with it, and I wasn't sure I could trust her with it anymore."

In another incident in the investigators class, when K and G run around in a dangerous way on the carpet, Peige withdraws the opportunity to play on the carpet.

K and G, sit down, please. Running in the classroom makes people fall down. I need for you to be safe. It is my job as the teacher to help you be safe. If you run again inside, then you will need to sit very quietly in a chair and read a book and that is all. I must know that you are safe, and if you are not being safe, then I must do something to make you safe, and that's the only thing I can think of. Okay, you have some choices to make for 5 more minutes (remaining in the activity period). You may not be on this rug because I have seen today that you two are out of control on this rug. There's painting, there's

construction, there's finger painting, there are puzzles to work, and there are books to read.

As Piaget points out, the young child may interpret these consequences as punitive. With explanation and emotional support, however, the child will gradually come to understand the logic of the reciprocity involved in this consequence.

Exclusion

Exclusion from the group is a logical consequence of violating the rights of others. Children frequently exclude others from playing when they violate rights. For example, 3-year-old Z responds to R's pinching by telling her that she doesn't want to be her friend. If a child behaves aggressively on the playground, the teacher may require him or her to play alone for awhile. Exclusion is involved in the example described in chapter 6 when S would not keep his hand off C during grouptime. When S continued his unwelcome touching, Peige enabled C to move, and when O sat next to S and was similarly bothered, she too, moved. Peige emphasized the exclusion consequence to S when she said, "You keep touching all the children, and they don't like it, so they move away, and now you don't have anybody to sit by."

This consequence is often difficult to invoke without making it a punishment. "Time out" is a widely used punishment that is not a reciprocity sanction. We object to "Time out, because it is unilateral and arbitrary. We discuss approaches to this consequence in the section below on principles of teaching.

Doing to the Child What the Child Has Done

This sanction is rarely appropriate for adults to use with children. However, we have seen a situation in which a teacher appropriately reminded children that they refused to help her, and that makes her reluctant to help them. Among children, this sanction is sometimes used in a punitive way. Situations may arise in which a child refuses to cooperate, yet later wants the same cooperation from someone else. A child who hurts another may not recognize the reciprocity when another hurts him or her. In chapter 5, we describe how Z was remorseless when she hurt C, but complained when W hurt her. Peige reminded her that she had done to C what W did to her.

Censure

Piaget (1932/1965) pointed out that censure alone (the other's simple opinion that one has let the other down or has, in some way, disrupted the relationship) is a reciprocity sanction when it makes "the transgressor realize how he has broken the bond of solidarity" (p. 209). The first author remembers vividly that day at about age 4 or 5

years when her mother responded to a wrongdoing by pulling her close and, with a note of sadness, telling her how disappointed she was in her. The remorse was far stronger in reaction to this consequence than to spanking.

We must caution strongly that to be a sanction by reciprocity, censure cannot be presented as coming from authority. It must be based on disruption in a relationship.

Piaget (1932/1965) noted that reciprocity sanctions do contain an element of suffering. But he pointed out that the suffering is not inflicted for the purpose of suffering, but "is simply an inevitable result of the breach of the bond of solidarity" (p. 206). The purpose of the consequence is to communicate that the wrongdoer has disrupted an interpersonal relationship.

GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTING CONSTRUCTIVIST ALTERNATIVES TO DISCIPLINE

To reduce the possibility that children will experience consequences as arbitrary and punitive, we suggest implementing the following constructivist teaching principles.

1. Avoid expiatory sanctions/punishments.

It is not unusual for an adult to feel that a child should be made to suffer for a misdeed. This may be vengeance based on anger, or it may derive from the common idea that if the child suffers, he or she will not do the misdeed again. Suffering may lead the child not to do the act again, or it may lead the child to resent or even hate the perpetrator of the suffering. It may lead the child to feel inwardly that he or she is bad and thereby negate self-esteem. Or it may lead the child to be more calculating next time so the adult does not find out. From the point of view of the child's psychological development, punishments are risky and most likely counterproductive if the adult wants to promote the child's moral development.

It is clear that any consequence, even the reciprocity consequences, can become expiatory if implemented with a punitive tone and attitude. To avoid turning reciprocity consequences into punishments, be matter-of-fact and supportive of the child.

2. Encourage children's ownership of logical consequences.

Logical consequences can often be discussed with children as a group. The teacher can help children become conscious of a problem, make sure that children agree and truly believe that a problem exists, and ask children for

opinions about what to do about the problem, with an emphasis on preventing future occurrences. Once the group has agreed on a logical consequence, children are more likely to understand the logic of the consequence. Constructivist teachers point out that even when children are warned of consequences, they sometimes still seem surprised to confront them. Children may not be able at times to think of consequences until these are experienced.

3. When children suggest a consequence that is too severe, ask the wrongdoer to say how he or she feels, and support this feeling.

When consulting young children about consequences, the teacher must be prepared for expiatory (punitive) suggestions. For example, in one class, the Special Helper was using a spray bottle of water to aid his cleaning. When D, an adult from a nearby office, walked past, the child deliberately sprayed water on her. At second group time, the children discussed the event and voted that he should be deprived of his Special Helper privileges for the rest of the day, and that these should be taken over by a teacher. The mistake here was in letting this issue be dealt with by the group. It should have been dealt with as an individual matter between D and the child. As mediator, the teacher could have led the child toward an understanding of D's point of view. The class's action, in contrast, only led the child to resent the punishment.

In Peige's Experimenters classroom (3-year-olds), urine was found on the bathroom floor over several days. Peige did not know who was responsible but suspected that more than one child was involved. She figured that they were not being malicious but thought it was funny. She brought the problem to the group for discussion. They talked about the health aspect, the unpleasant smell, the problem of trying not to step in it, etc. The children generated an elaborate set of rules that were posted in the bathroom. The rules included "Put pee-pee in the potty," "Wash your hands after you pee," etc. Also posted was the consequence the children created for breaking the rule. This was "You can never use the potty at school again." Peige did not question the severity of this consequence because she knew that it made sense to the children and that they would not change their view until confronted with implementing it. A week later, children found K urinating on the floor. A class meeting was called to discuss what to do. K was terribly distressed, and Peige asked the Assistant Teacher to hold him and be his advocate. She herself could not do this because her responsibility was to be the moral voice of the class. When the children insisted that K could never use the potty at school, he began to fall apart. Peige asked him if he did not like that idea. He was able to say, "But what if I need to go potty and I can't wait 'til I go home? I'll wet myself." Peige was then able to elaborate his point and represent this view to the class. She pointed out that that

would make a mess and be sad for K. Peige invited K to talk about whether he was really through peeing on the floor. The group did not withdraw its consequence but decided that K could have one more chance, to his relief.

4. Verbalized the cause-effect relation when natural consequences occur.

Children do not always make the cause-effect connection when natural consequences occur. Peige (T) brought such a consequence to children's awareness when she showed them a broken classroom decoration at group time.

T: Before we get started on the story, we have a little problem. Do you remember we had a talk about how careful we needed to be if we had delicate decorations in our class? (Hold up broken decoration)

Children: Yes.

T: And we decided we liked this one?

Children: Yes

T: Well, this delicate decoration has been ruined and will have to be thrown away because people didn't take care of it. (A matter-of-fact, nonjudgmental tone of voices to avoid the possibility that children will hear it as a criticism.)

1. Selectively allow natural consequences to occur.

Teachers sometimes rescue children from natural consequences and lose an opportunity for children to construct the relation between action and consequence. For example, the teacher may separate children in a conflict without letting them experience the other's reactions. Or, the teacher may constantly put the caps back on markers. We understand the concern for waste but believe that the lesson on consequences is well worth a wasted marker.

Two kindergarten boys during a cookie-making activity were careless and did not pay close attention to the recipe. They put in one cup of baking powder instead of one teaspoon. The teacher observed their error and could have prevented it. However, she felt that the only way the boys would become more serious and careful about cooking was to experience the result of their carelessness. At snacktime when everyone tried the cookies, children were disappointed and said they tasted "yucky." The teacher was able to review the recipe with them and help them realize their error. The next time they made cookies, they were more serious and careful.

In the instance involving running in the classroom, mentioned above, Peige decides to intervene before a natural consequence occurs. Her responsibility for the safety of her children is too important to risk injury as a natural

consequence of K and G's out-of-control behavior. Instead, she talks to K and G and invokes a logical consequence, depriving the children of the thing misused (in this case, the opportunity to play on the carpet).

2. Offer opportunities for restitution.

Restitution helps a child regain dignity and self-respect after a misdeed as well as repair the rift in the social bond between the misdoer and the victim. In the following example, Peige (T) matter-of-factly handles the situation when G slaps K's hand and causes him to drop his wet clay object on the teacher's sweater. After attending to the hitting issues, she says:

T: Do you know what happened? You knocked his thing down which might have broken it, and it got it all over my sweater. I didn't like that when you got it all over my sweater. So, could you please do something to get this off of my sweater?

G: Yeah.

T: Okay, what can you do?

G: Wipe it off.

T: Okay, thank you very much.

G: Can you get that game off the shelf for me?

T: Remember, G, you're getting something to wipe off my sweater 'cause it's really yucky.

G: (Get paper towel and wipes sweater) it comes off easy.

T: Thank you.

Restitution can take the form of making a hurt child feel better. Once a conflict discussion turns in the direction of recognition of the other's pain, the teacher can open the way for restitution. We caution that if restitution is done as a result of coercion, it turns into punishment.

1. When exclusion is invoked, open the way to reinstatement.

The exclusion consequence should never be invoked by the teacher without indicating how or when the child may be reinstated as a participant in the group. It is best if the control of the exclusion can be given to the child. When W complains to Peige that D keeps on hitting him with his head, Peige makes several efforts to mediate a conflict resolution, but this does not seem to lead to a reduction in hitting. Peige then approaches D in the following way. "If you are going to hurt children, you cannot be with them, so you will either need to stop hurting or, if you keep hurting, you will need to get away from the children. Which one will be?"

At group time, young children sometimes talk or play and disturb others. In chapter 6, we discuss how to approach children in respectful ways, to give them opportunities for regulating their behavior voluntarily. If a child seriously disrupts, the teacher may have to ask him or her to leave. One strategy that sometimes works well is to give children the opportunity to take themselves out of the circle, to sit quietly at a table and return when they feel ready. The teacher thus cooperates with the child by recognizing that he or she may not want to be in circle and by offering a nonpunitive way in which to withdraw that protects autonomy. While this is different from the arbitrary and punitive use of "Time out," it can still be experienced by the child as punitive.

We should also say that there are times when a child refuses to leave voluntarily and a teacher must make the child leave, in order to protect the rights of children who want to enjoy circle. In order to reduce the coercion as much as possible, the teacher should explain why the child has to leave. If no assistant is available at the time, the teacher should find a later time in which to talk with the child. This conversation should be relaxed and sympathetic but firm about the logic of the consequence. By trying to learn the child's perspective, the teacher may be able to lead the child to understand something of the perspective of others in the group.

2. When children exclude others, help the excluded child find a way to reenter play and improve peer relations.

It would be disrespectful of children's feelings to insist that they play with a child they have excluded. In chapter 5, we tell the story of the child excluded from pretend play. When the teacher asks if he can be a brother, they happily agree. Often the teacher can help the excluded child find a role that will be valued by other children. Sometimes, the problem is less easy to solve if it reflects a longstanding experience of the children with each other. For example, an aggressive child may be excluded "because you have hurting hands." Or an overly competitive child may be excluded as children complain. "You cheat all the time, and you don't listen to our words!" In these cases, the teacher will have to work to help the child decenter and cooperate so that his or her behavior will be more acceptable to the peer group.

3. Avoid indefinite consequences.

A consequence should be clear and definite so the child knows what to do to avoid it in the future and what to do to reinstate him- or her-self when it is invoked. In the following example, the teacher leaves the consequence so vague that children are left in doubt as to what they can do to reinstate

themselves. When children scatter the Construx all over the floor, despite the teacher's effort to get children to keep them on the table, the teacher invokes the logical consequence of withdrawing the children's possibility of using of these materials. After collecting all the Construx, three children, H, S, and C leave the class to take the Construx back to the kindergarten class from which they were borrowed. The children play in the hallway, and H falls and hurts himself. The teacher has a conversation like the following with each child.

T: S, you really like doing special stuff and going to other peoples' classes. Do you like that?

S: (Nods)

T: But when you do it, do you know what happens? You make the choice to fool around instead of just going and doing it. So, S, that shows me that you cannot be safe if you do these things, and if you cannot be safe, then you can't do them. So that will be something that you cannot do for a while until you show us that you know how to be in control and just go to the class and just come back.

The teacher gives the children no indication of how long this privilege will be revoked, or what the children might do to retain the teacher's trust.

In contrast, after a 4-year-old is excluded from field trips, Peige adjusts the lesson plans in order to help the child reinstate himself. R was a problem whenever the Investigators went on a field trip, running away from the group and violating other rules. As a class they discussed field trip rules and decided that any child who could not listen to the teacher's words and follow the rules on fields trips would not be allowed to go on the next field trip. Sure enough, this happened to R on a trip to visit the campus newspaper. However, Peige knew that a big field trip to the zoo was coming up, and she did not want R to miss it. So she planned two small field trips before the zoo trip. On the first, R was not allowed to go on a walk across campus to play on some favorite trees. Peige emphasized that this was the consequence on which the group had agreed. Before the second campus trip, Peige talked with R about his behavior, explaining that if he did not follow the rules, he would not be allowed to go on the zoo trip. She asked him if he could demonstrate to her that he could be trusted on field trips now. He said that he could. Peige gave him the opportunity to regain her trust on the second small trip so that he would not experience the disappointment of missing the big trip.

Summary

Constructivist teachers do not "discipline" children in the sense of controlling and punishing them. Rather, the constructivist alternatives to such discipline focus on strategies to foster children's construction of convictions about relating to others in cooperative ways. Piaget's distinction between expiatory and reciprocity sanctions provides the basis for planning general responses to misdeeds. More specifically, the criterion of reciprocity leads constructivist teachers to six types of sanctions (discussed by Piaget) that emphasize the social bonds broken by children's misdeeds. To reduce the possibility that children will experience consequences as arbitrary and punitive, constructivist teachers follow nine guidelines that protect children's autonomy and lead to development.

Rheta DeVries is Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Director of the Iowa Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education at the University of Northern Iowa

Betty S. Zan is a Research Fellow at the Iowa Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education at the University of Northern Iowa and a doctoral candidate in Developmental Psychology at the University of Houston (information current as of 1994)
