



## DISCIPLINE: The Real Answer?

By Steve Greeley, [srgreeley@earthlink.net](mailto:srgreeley@earthlink.net)  
Imagymnation Gymnastics Center, Simi Valley, Calif.

These are common questions asked in Congress Preschool Roundtable discussions:

**"How do I manage a preschool student's behavior?"**

**"Do you have a preschool discipline policy?"**

"Managing" behavior can easily be interpreted as "controlling" children; to restrict or confine them within certain subjective behavior parameters.

A "discipline policy" sounds like a set of rules complete with punishments.

**THINK:** What usually happens when we try to "control" children (or adults)?

**THINK:** How do children (or adults) respond when slapped with rules or "If you do this... then this will happen..." situations?

True, growing up is a constant series of choices and consequences but think... even more...

As you watch the BEST teachers - be it in gymnastics, swimming, dance, piano, or school - have you noticed the absolute finest, stand-out, respected, kick-butt teachers have very few discipline problems in their classes?

**WHY?** Great teachers don't dwell on the need for discipline. They tend to ignore the popular labels: 'problem child,' 'A.D.H.D,' 'slow,' 'delayed,' 'hyper,' 'combative,' 'at-risk.' They don't point their finger at "problem students." Instead, they point the finger at themselves. They concentrate on improving their own teaching abilities and the learning environment.



In gymnastics circles you'll often hear,  
-"Oh no, it's a boy's class!"  
-"I just have a personality conflict with that kid."  
-"I hate this Monday 5:00 class. They're so hyper."

-or conversely "I love this class. All the kids are so good."

**Remember this:** Anyone can teach/coach the "good" kids. A true TEACHER can get through to ANY CHILD with ANY problem or limitation. That's what sets them apart from the mediocre masses. They surpass the realm of "coach/ teacher" and can be considered true educators of children.

Instead of focusing on the need for discipline, great educators continually work on expanding their teaching abilities. They not only improve their knowledge of the technical aspects of their sport but even more importantly, they learn to become better communicators. I have an unshakable belief that teaching is 25% knowledge and 75% communication.

Watch the preschool teachers - or any great teacher - you know and respect. What is it that sets them apart? Probably their communication abilities. Put them in front of a group of four-year-olds and watch the magic begin. They use voice inflection. They know how to vary the tone and pitch of their voice to maintain children's interest. They know the power of a whisper and what a 'secret' means to a child. They make sound effects, imitate video game noises and cartoon voices. They're uninhibited. They'll do just about anything to make the learning process more fun for children.

They have mastered physical communication. They're high-energy beings because they know how children mirror the behavior of the role models in their lives. Watch their body language. It's open, giving and often gawky and slapstick with pratfalls and things kids respond to. They pretend to be physically awkward while demonstrating so the students will take the helm and teach them.



Contrast these physical qualities with teachers who do their work sitting, leaning and laying on a mat. Notice the energy level and enthusiasm of the students of "horizontal coaches." They're the coaches who tend to use lots of discipline, control and intimidation... they need it because that's all they have, man. They hide behind their size advantage, their loud voices or their position of authority. Teaching techniques from the 50s & 60s. They may have worked on Beaver Cleaver, but they don't have much influence on the children of today.



Great teachers don't dwell on the need for discipline because they can think on their feet. They're fast. They're one step ahead of every student, no matter how many kids they have that day. If they happen to have a class with Eddie Haskell, Bart Simpson, Dennis the Menace, the kids from South Park- then Damien III walks in to take a makeup, they can out-hyper them all with a Jedi Training warm up or a full Spider-Man circuit. They keep them off balance, learning and laughing.

Great teachers know how important humor is in a learning situation. Kids love fun. They have no useful job skills at this age, fun is their main occupation, what they live for. They use facial expression and body language to rival Jim Carrey and Robin Williams. They can excite children by their wide eyes, their smile, their laugh. They can make a child evaluate their behavior just by lifting an eyebrow. No reprimand needed.

These teachers have their classes planned in advance, in writing. They're always early. All their equipment is ready, their circuits have been prepared. They know the names of new students in advance. They know the names of today's makeup students. It's hard to catch these teachers having an off-day... 'cuz it rarely happens.

Great teachers know the responsibility of being a role model for children (and parents... and co-workers.) They wouldn't think of walking into a preschool class smelling like cigarettes or not looking their best.

Great teachers become great by working at it EVERY DAY. NO MATTER HOW MANY YEARS THEY'VE BEEN TEACHING! They watch other teachers. They go to other gyms. They read books. They learn from life. They get ideas from movies, from cereal boxes, from watching children to see what motivates and excites them. They don't wait for a once-a-year seminar to improve their abilities!

This is the foundation: ourselves, our character and our teaching abilities. Of these abilities, the last and least significant is our technical knowledge of a cartwheel or a back handspring.



Once these are established, the next level is continually growing relationships with our students. As positive as we try to be, we've all seen instructors who horrify us, who we feel have no business teaching children; who are more suited for a day job of clubbing baby seals or working as a clerk at the DMV. They demean, berate, humiliate, and punish. These are behaviors that cause scars, not relationships. We can all think back to at least one time when we were publicly humiliated. The memory doesn't easily fade, does it? Have you ever REALLY forgiven that person?

What type of relationship do the Darth Vader coaches have with their students? Is it one of full mutual respect? Of unconditional approval? Do their classes truly have fun? Do their students come back to visit them years later? Would their students want their own children taught by the same coach? Do these people truly, honestly, absolutely and unequivocally enjoy their profession? Do they appreciate the gift we've been given of educating and molding the next generation?

Great teachers have empathy, compassion and trust. Trust is something that can't be commanded or demanded. We can only EARN trust from our students when we prove ourselves trustworthy.



They believe in making the expectations clear to all students of all ages, in advance. Then they do the hardest thing: they TRUST their students to follow their expectations. Yes, some do breach that trust, but if the building blocks of the relationship are in place, it's a very, very small percentage. And seasoned teachers can easily deal with these minor instances. Often, fellow students will deal with them.

Expectations and trust vs. rules, control and punishments. Which do you believe in? Which would you rather work toward in your personal beliefs? In your gym's beliefs? Which would you rather be known for?

In the past 30 years I've been to many preschool seminars where young impressionable coaches ask the questions: "What do you do when kids won't listen?... When they swear?... When they push and shove?...When they won't cooperate???"

And I've heard answers like: "Oh, I give them a time out..." "I put them in our 'Penalty Box'..." "We have a 'three strikes' rule in our gym..." "I won't give them a sticker until they behave..." "We make the punishment fit the crime." And we set the time machine back to the 50s & 60s... AGAIN.

And I watch as these young, hungry, impressionable coaches write down this stuff, verbatim.

Because they need help, they desperately want answers and this is the best they've heard to this point.

**QUESTION THESE ANSWERS, PEOPLE!**

Do you really believe these to solve our discipline problems LONG TERM? Or are these just techniques, gimmicks, band-aids? I put forth to you the idea that a 'time-out' is just a superficial band aid applied to a deeper problem. Remember, the kids we apply these band-aids to are usually the greasiest and the toughest. And how long do band-aids stay on greasy, tough kids? Right.

I'll argue that maybe the problem lies much deeper below the surface. Maybe the problem is that we teachers need to improve our physical and verbal communication skills, need to have more consistent, detailed class plans, need to be more creative and fun when teaching preschoolers, need to take the responsibility to educate ourselves more than once a year. Maybe we need to think much more about the relationships we have with our individual students than with the mechanics of cartwheels and handstands.

Maybe we need to think less about discipline and more about valuing the differences in children. As a teacher, would you really want an entire group of perfectly behaved kids... hour after hour... day after day? "Stepford Kids?" I've learned some of my greatest teaching lessons from that red-haired, wild child who "accidentally" falls in the pit or swings on the rope into the wall or takes a chalk bath when I'm not looking. I've often thought that I've learned more from them than they have from me.

Those of you with your own children: Did you raise your second child exactly like the first? How 'bout your third child?

Every child is different. Value those differences. Learn from them. Learn to guide them instead of controlling them. Childhood is a precious fleeting time. Kids need to be kids while they can. As educators, our job is not to stifle the fun but to magnify it, glorify it, celebrate it and to channel it into education. It takes thought. It takes work. It takes introspection.

But that's what great teachers do.