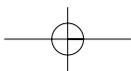# PART I

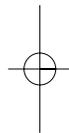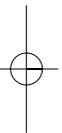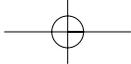## The Role of Discipline

"But, my mom doesn't care if I jump on a chair."

1

Discipline in Classrooms, Families, and Society

It's Monday morning, and Mrs. Jones, the kindergarten teacher, is taking roll. She begins to go down her list by calling out the children's names, one by one:

"Dominic?" *[He's there, in the back of the room]*

"Susie?" *[There she is. . . . little wallflower]*

"Glenn?" *[Present, and cute as usual]*

"Renee?" *[She's there. . . . for now!]*

"Mark? Where's Mark? Is he in the back? No, that's Brian. Is Mark here today? Well, he's not over there. . . . Has anyone seen Mark today? Hmm. I guess . . . I guess he's not here today. He is not present. Mark's not here! Mark is not here! MARK IS NOT HERE! YES! No Mark tantrums! No Mark fights! No Mark arguments! IT'S TIME FOR A CELEBRATION! IT'S GOING TO BE A GREAT DAY TODAY! No Mark interruptions to distract the other kids. No Mark whining to take me away from the others. I'm going be able to get work done today. It's going to be a GREAT day! MARK IS NOT HERE TODAY!"

Which child is it in *your* classroom whose absence causes you to celebrate inside? It's not likely to be the invisible child who never causes any trouble. That child is virtually unknown to you and the other children because she's so quiet. It might be the fidgety one. Or the "Yes, but . . ." kid, as in "Yes, he's bright, but he's so active!" Or "Yes, Carmel is very sweet, but she can't keep her hands or feet still." How do the darlings of mommies and daddies become the good, great, and . . . well, *other* children of preschool, kindergarten, and elementary, middle, and high school? How do they become the academic and social successes or failures of schools and their future communities?

Think for a moment about the opening vignette. Did you laugh? Did you, by any chance, relate? If so, then you've probably wondered how that child became the child who gives you a feeling of elation every time he or she is absent. Is it due to the dynamics of the classroom, the playground, the home, the family, and the neighborhood or the media? The answer is the classic therapist answer: It depends!

Communities That Affect Children's Development

The home, the family, the neighborhood, the class, the playground, and even the media are the communities every child grows up and develops in. Each and every one of these communities influences the child's development and predicts future success or failure in other communities. A young child's future communities include middle and high school, college, various formal and informal teams, performing groups, clubs, partnerships (platonic and romantic, unofficial and legally sanctioned), the workplace, places of spiritual fellowship, family configurations of many kinds, and more. The success or failure of a child cannot be measured in academic or financial success, nor can it be measured by the amount of trophies or other material things accumulated.

Success or failure is truly measured by a person's ability to function well in his or her community.

Home and School: The First and Second Communities

The home is the first community for children. From the behaviors, habits, discipline, and values of the home, they move to the next communities: preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school classrooms

and playgrounds. Teachers then face the challenge of integrating the diverse backgrounds and discipline of anywhere from four to thirty or more children in their classrooms, all the while attempting to accomplish the agenda of teaching various academics. Teachers are usually amazingly effective in accomplishing this task—that is, if they can only get the children to sit still, or pay attention, or keep their hands off each other (or out of the fish tank), or whatever incredibly creative, new aggravations children come up with!

Family Expectations and Classroom Expectations

Discipline serves to direct a child toward appropriate behavior. However, the appropriate behavior that is taught in a child's home may or may not match what is considered appropriate behavior in future and other communities, including your classroom. This is often quickly discovered during visits to Grandma's and Grandpa's, where expectations may differ significantly. Or at the grocery store versus at home. Or by many children at the same time on the first day of school. Sometimes the expectations in one's home change with additions or subtractions to the family community. When guests are present, suddenly the dress code changes. Running around in just a diaper or underwear, acceptable and normal at all other times, becomes unacceptable. Or when dad's gone, the food menu changes drastically! The first training ground of socialization—that is, for the child to behave appropriately in society at large—is in the miniature society of the family.

When the socialization expectations of the family are a relative match for the expectations of the later and larger societies, then the child may be prepared for (or at least not surprised by) them. Teachers who encounter families that send successive children into their classrooms find they can predict the fit or misfit between their expectations and the successive siblings' behavior just by reading the class list before school starts. In addition, certain societies or communities (including families) are more or less functional and more or less healthy.

Different Children Come to the Classroom Differently

A child raised in a functional, healthy family may be surprised by a dysfunctional or unhealthy society or community (new family, classroom, workplace, or even larger institution). However, such a

child will still be more readily able to survive and maintain function-
ality and health in the new community. In other words, a relatively
healthy, socially and emotionally adept child will tend to do relatively
well even in a relatively chaotic classroom with a less-than-organized
or experienced teacher.

Children who come with dysfunctional behavioral expectations
may be "successful" in a larger matching community but with a con-
tinuation of the psychological and emo-
tional destruction they have suffered in
their families. Or in a differing yet still dys-
functional and unhealthy community, they
may lack a healthy psychological emotional
foundation or model to deal with new chal-
lenges. Sometimes family members adapt
their expectations to accommodate their
challenging child, but that child may be able to function only in the
family and be left unprepared for the greater community. A family
may make accommodations that allow for the child's challenging
behavior that few, if any, others in any other community (neighbor-
hood, playground, school, etc.) would be willing to make. This can be
a huge challenge for the teacher. Such children enter into the class-
room with implicit expectations that the teacher and the other
children will accommodate their entitlement, personality, lack of per-
sonal space boundaries, fussiness, tantrums, and so forth. Stunned
that they are not accommodated, they may respond with withdrawal
and/or anger that will compromise the educational mission of the
classroom.

> *A family may make accommodations that allow for a child's challenging behavior that few, if any, others in any other community would be willing to make.*

We now return to Mark, the absent child in the opening vignette.
This window on his background helps us understand his teacher's
reaction.

Mark: Failing in Communities

Mark was a very challenging child at 3 years old. He was very
active, very loud, and very impulsive. He was a sweetheart, but
(another "Yes, but . . ." kid) his energy and lack of social awareness
caused him to antagonize just about everyone outside of his parents.
His parents loved him and his 4-year-old brother dearly, of course.
They understood his energy and largely accepted it. They made
accommodations to help Mark: He was allowed to have more time
than his brother to get his clothes on; plenty of warning when there
was going to be a transition; few, if any, trips shopping with only one
parent; curtailed social activities that would be too difficult for him to

handle, and so forth. Their major accommodation was to change their lives and the home community to fit his abilities.

Missing the Point

For the most part, individuals function in communities of one kind or another. In fact, in modern society, most people need to function in several successive if not simultaneous communities in their lifetimes. Mark's family did a "reverse socialization": rather than socializing Mark to their community (the family), they socialized (adapted and changed themselves) to his personality, *despite the fact that his personality caused him to be ostracized or punished by others outside the family.* Respecting individuality must not mean allowing people to express their individuality in ways that are intrusive or destructive of others' safety, sanity, security, and serenity. Respecting a child's personality and individuality is a highly honorable principle. However, in the extreme, it misses out on the need for socialization.

> *Balancing the individual child's needs and personality with community needs and standards is the key challenge.*

From Home to Preschool

As soon as Mark stepped outside of his family, his behavior started drawing severe consequences. In his neighborhood, as much as they liked his brother, most of the other children hated him. His preschool teachers didn't like him, either. He made their lives miserable! He made the staff and the other children feel frustrated and angry. Although the teachers were professional and refrained from labeling him a "bad boy," their body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice clearly communicated their dislike. As much as adults try to make a distinction between the behavior and the child, when the behavior is consistently troublesome and the adults' frustration becomes extreme, then the child becomes the negative behavior and the negative behavior becomes the child.

Of course, Mark's self-esteem plummeted. He had high self-esteem that had developed within his family—his parents loved him! But no one else loved him enough to tolerate his behavior. To them, he was a "bad boy."

From Preschool to Kindergarten

Life became even more difficult for Mark when he entered kindergarten. He had the misfortune of entering a class with a teacher who

was "real tired" of working with challenging children but had not yet retired. In her classroom, Mark's behavior was quickly labeled as outrageous and intolerable. The teacher decided that Mark was a "problem child," along with another five of the eleven boys in the class. As the manager of the community, her negativity made Mark's daily misery so overwhelming that he became a kindergarten dropout before the winter break. Mark failed to succeed in three communities (neighborhood, preschool, and kindergarten), mainly because his first community—the home—did not prepare him adequately.

Discipline From the Inside Out

Discipline comes from the inside out in many ways. It comes from the inside, the emotional and psychological history of the adults, and moves out into the developmental challenges of the child. As a former preschool, elementary, and secondary school teacher and now family therapist, I have experienced many children who had significant difficulties dealing with mainstream group expectations once they were outside the family. Oftentimes, their difficulties come from the mismatch between family socialization and the larger-group standards.

Functionally, in families with a smaller ratio of adults to children, parents can get away with discipline that involves intensive supervision and little or no self-management on the part of the children. As a result, children may not be taught or may not be expected to internalize behavioral boundaries. Adults stay vigilant (hypervigilant!) and/or restrictive to prevent their children from crossing any boundaries. They will hold the cup of milk for their children, bathe their children past the time they are developmentally ready to bathe themselves, and intervene with other children for their children when there is a conflict. For a teacher with anywhere from several to thirty or more other children to teach, guide, and stimulate, this intensive monitoring and regulating is impossible.

Discipline Comes From *Disciple*

"Discipline" comes from the word *disciple*, that is, one who learns and conforms to a healthy and positive way of life taught or promoted by a more experienced and wiser individual. Of course, some parents or teachers may not be all that wise despite experience! Often adults try to force their children to make the "right" choices. However, when this backfires, they find they've created highly defiant

and acting-out children, or depressed and anxious children who are unable to make their own choices. Discipline in the form of intensive monitoring and regulation may direct more positive behavior, but it does not teach children self-discipline. We can help children make good behavioral choices by helping them develop their self-control, not by controlling them to make the choices we prefer (Gootman, 2001).

Practice Makes *Better*

The Chinese character for *learning* is made up of the words *study* and *practice.* Without practice, study does not create learning. One never gets the experience that promotes and solidifies the learning. Without study, practice does not create learning. One never examines the experiences for positive or negative consequences and a determination of good principles. Practice does not make perfect. However, practice is necessary for learning. And practice includes and accepts mistakes as part of children's learning process of how to have a healthy and successful life and relationships. There will be

> *Teachers need to allow the classroom and playground to be practice places for behavior improvement, and not expect them to be sites of perfect, angelic behavior.*

personality conflicts, stresses, and disappointments in the classroom, just as there are in life. To help children address these issues appropriately, teachers need to understand the children and their own roles in managing them.

Harry Wong (1991) has identified three characteristics of the effective teacher:

1. Has good classroom management skills

2. Teaches for mastery

3. Has positive expectations for student success

Unlucky Mark, from the opening vignette, had a teacher with flaws in two of these areas. Mrs. Jones had poor classroom management skills and negative expectations for Mark's success. Her attitude toward him infected the other children's perceptions of Mark as well. Mark had trouble being successful both as a student and as a friend. The ways in which Mrs. Jones disciplined and guided him affected the way others viewed him, both academically and socially.

Appropriate Discipline Develops Social Competence

Preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school children are fairly matter-of-fact: "If you are nice and treat me nicely, I will like you. If you are not nice and hurt me, I won't like you and I won't play with you." Unfortunately, some children who exhibit acting-out behaviors don't realize the way they affect how other children think of them. When teachers ridicule or punish these children, rather than attempt to help them fit in by developing their "social competence," they perpetuate a developing problem and jeopardize critical socialization among classmates. According to Robert Sylwester (2003),

> Social competence involves the ability to quickly size up and appropriately respond to social situations. Our complex social structure functions via our innate sense of cooperation, early experiences with adults and children, and a set of social rules (or manners) that might actually be quite arbitrary and culture driven. Manners thus don't come naturally but must be taught. Helpful activities are those that encourage the constant informal interactions that allow participants to discover how others respond to their behavior and that specifically teach the social conventions a group must observe if they are to effectively work together. (p. 44)

Most children do not overtly and defiantly deviate from social norms. However, children do not have to be socially deviant, hostile, or disrespectful to be excluded by classmates. Children may only not be in tune to the rhythms of the group or conversant in the social language of peers. Children may be hyperfocused on their own needs, rather than aware of the needs of others. Children and adults who are poorly attuned or poorly socialized to group expectations become socially incompetent or socially inept. They make frequent social blunders and tend to have difficulty fitting in throughout their lives.

Classroom Rules Are Mediated by Culture

Each community and each classroom community has its own sets of expectations, rules, and consequences. These are rarely articulated as clear "do's and don'ts." Harry Wong (1991) noted that "the family as a support group is the guardian and disseminator of culture." Added to the family are schools, communities, and various media

influences that all interact in complex ways to create the child's culture. Culture can be defined as the rules, values, and behaviors of a person or group, and children clearly bring their culture into the classroom with them.

Teachers normally set and explain classroom citizenship or community expectations at the beginning of the term: Listen to others, be respectful, do not interrupt someone who is talking, wait for your turn, and so forth. On the other hand, many other expectations are implicitly taught and monitored. Often children figure out these unspoken rules over time only as they break them, fully unaware that there were rules in the first place! In her groundbreaking book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby Payne (1996) made a distinction between generational poverty and situational poverty. Generational poverty exists when a family has been in poverty for two or more generations. Situational poverty occurs when there is a death, divorce, illness, or other hardship whereby resources are temporarily reduced. Children from generational poverty have difficulty reading the hidden cues that more mainstream or middle-class children and teachers readily understand. Even if your student population is not from generational poverty, their family cues, rules, and expectations may differ significantly from the school culture.

> *Often children figure out the unspoken rules of the classroom only as they break them, fully unaware that there were rules in the first place!*

The "Elevator Rules"

When asked for the "elevator rules," most people give you a bemused look. When encouraged, they tentatively start to propose some rules with a growing realization that they do know the elevator rules:

- Stand facing the elevator door.
- Avoid eye contact, especially after the door closes.
- Don't talk to the other people in the elevator.
- If you must talk to someone, whisper.
- Put your hands either by your sides or in front of you, and never behind your back (you might touch someone!).
- And finally, watch the floor numbers light up as if it is completely fascinating!

How did we all learn the elevator rules? When we were young, curious, and spontaneous, our parents taught us what was and was

not okay to do through looks and hushed instructions. Knowing the elevator rules may seem innocuous. However, when someone violates the rules, that person is perceived with anything from bemusement to disdain to annoyance, especially if he or she is an adult. Many other implicit social rules exist:

How late is it appropriate to call someone in the evening?

Is it always necessary to send a thank-you note for a present?

How many times should you offer to pay for someone else?

How many times should you decline before accepting?

Disciplining for Socialization

Discipline can be an effective way to help socialize children to the expectations of peers, teachers, parents, and the greater society. As Marva Collins (1992) wrote, "Remember, school is a microcosm of the real world" (p. 50). The socialization model a teacher presented in last year's classroom is critical to the socialization process in this year's classroom—the current "real world." Your socialization model affects the child's success in next year's classroom—the next "real world," and so on and so forth. When children deviate from a positive socialization model, then discipline may be necessary in developing

Do your classroom rules reflect the rules of the real world?

healthy socialization. Collins continued, "The reason most schools do not work is that school is just the opposite of what is expected of citizens in the real world" (p. 50). As you evaluate your methods of discipline, consider whether or not the rules and expectations of children's families are reflected in your own classroom expectations. Do your classroom rules reflect the rules of the real world?

Chapter Highlights

- Discipline is about helping children be successful in their diverse communities: the family, neighborhood, classroom, and larger society.
- If a child misbehaves in the classroom, consider whether or not there might be a mismatch between family and class behavioral expectations.

- Parents may overadapt to their children's personalities, inadvertently hampering their children's social awareness and ability to interact healthily with peers. Teachers may then need to actively promote socialization in their classrooms.
- Children need to be taught about the expectations of the school community. What is accepted in the family may be a major social mistake elsewhere. At the same time, what are understood as social norms by some students may not be recognized as such by others. Clear expectations prepare all students for academic and social success.