STRATEGY

8

Improving Relationships and Communication

Working toward Positive Relationships and Effective Communication among Teacher, Students, and Parents and Guardians

You can achieve this strategy by communicating well with students and teaching them the basic behaviors of good relations and communication, all the while emphasizing how those behaviors promote cooperation, enjoyment, and progress. Also be sure to relate and communicate well with parents and guardians.

Chapter Preview

This chapter addresses the roles that human relationships and communication play in classrooms, especially in those with high levels of interaction. Three important matters are explored: (1) enhancing personal relations, (2) enhancing communication, and (3) communicating with students' parents and guardians. The chapter presents suggested tactics for connecting with others, building relationships, listening empathetically, avoiding roadblocks to communication, and using congruent communication.

ENHANCING PERSONAL RELATIONS

In these days of declining respect for others, we can do well to teach students about people who are outstanding in sales and customer relations. Ask students to imagine how they would behave toward others who were potential but not necessarily enthusiastic customers, upon whose business their livelihood depended. (Such is more or less the position in which teachers find themselves.) Ask students if they understand why good salespersons smile and welcome customers in a friendly manner, put them at ease, convey a sense of appreciation for their presence, ask if they might be of help, and listen to what we say without allowing themselves to be distracted. Business

owners want their sales staff to treat customers in that way for obvious reasons: It increases the likelihood the customer will buy something, and it helps the business maintain a good reputation, which is not to be taken lightly. Even if no sale is made, the customer will remember the good treatment and will be predisposed to returning later. Word does get around about businesses (and people) who treat others well. We never go wrong when we deal with each other pleasantly and respectfully.

You might feel that if we carry the notion too far, we'll look like hucksters who depend on fakery and flattery. Certainly, we want to be sincere in relations with others, but when it comes to effective human relations, most of us err by showing too little appreciation for each other. We promote a positive outlook when we wish somebody a good day or say how nice it is to see him or her. We only appear insincere when we are inconsistent or when we seem to be trying to get others to do something they don't want to do.

Fundamental Skills in Human Relations

The term *good human relations* refers to human interactions that people, in general, find satisfying and beneficial. Interactive classrooms cannot function adequately unless class members engage with each other respectfully and helpfully. One way to enhance interaction involves teachers and students learning and practicing the techniques of attracting the attention of others in a positive manner, giving undivided attention in return, and fostering the impression they are considerate and trustworthy people with whom to associate.

The following paragraphs present basic interrelational skills that are useful in the classroom and elsewhere. Consider discussing them with students. The basic paradigm for teaching these skills consists of modeling the desired behavior, providing directed practice, calling on students to display the new skills in a variety of situations, and asking for student appraisal and other feedback on the resultant effects.

- ***Skill 1: Break the ice and make a good impression.*** It is difficult for many students and adults to initiate interactions with others, especially strangers and people who are older. If that applies to your students, you might discuss and practice what to do when you meet someone new. Point out the importance of making a good first impression by smiling, introducing oneself, shaking hands, and using the other person's name. Ask students to reflect on what they have seen and heard people do that makes a good impression.
- ***Skill 2: Open up communication.*** Discuss with students how they can use "door openers" and empathetic listening to initiate and sustain a conversation. *Door openers* are comments or questions that encourage another person to talk, such as "That's interesting; tell me more about it" or "What do you think we'd have to do if we tried something like that? Would it be possible? How could we make it happen?" As the other person responds, we can use *empathetic listening* to grasp not only what that person is saying but what it means from his or her point of view. Take mental notes and, from time to time, repeat what the other person has said and ask if you

have understood him or her correctly. (Later in this chapter, we will examine Stephen Covey's suggestions for empathetic listening.)

- ***Skill 3: Confer dignity on others.*** One of the most powerful techniques for influencing other people is to confer dignity on them, making them feel valued and respected. We help people feel valued when we remember and use their names and mention admirable things we have learned about them. We help them feel respected when we treat them courteously as equal human beings, ask their opinions, listen to them, and acknowledge their contributions. When we confer dignity in these ways, others become inclined to seek us out, cooperate, and show us respect in return.
- ***Skill 4: Encourage others to cooperate with you.*** At times, you may find yourself in a working relationship with someone who, for one reason or another, is not inclined to cooperate. Let's say you are a student and are going to do a project with a new boy named Dennis. The two of you are assigned to make an oral report on the moons of Saturn. From the ice-breaker conversation, you get the idea that Dennis likes you well enough but is not going to do his part of the assignment. He says he has to work after school and doesn't have time to practice any speeches. He says he will write his part out, and you or the teacher can read it. You listen to him carefully and get the impression that what is really bothering him is not the work itself but making the oral presentation. You say, "Dennis, I'm wondering if we can work out a deal. I'll make the report to the class if you'll help look up the information and get it in order. We could call you the consultant and me the reporter. During the presentation, I might ask you from time to time where you found the information and what you think about it. It might be fun. Want to try it?"
- ***Skill 5: Show yourself to be a trustworthy person.*** Earlier chapters have presented tactics that help build bonds of trust among teachers and students. It has been explained that ethical principles such as kindness, consideration, helpfulness, fairness, and honesty should be emphasized in all facets of class work and practiced until they become second nature. In Chapter 7, William Glasser's suggestions for replacing deadly habits with connecting habits were discussed. You might wish to refer back to them at this point.

Giving Students Personal Attention

One of the most effective things teachers can do to establish positive relations with students is to make them feel noticed, valued, and capable of success. Students who receive regular positive attention from teachers don't cause much trouble in the classroom. Some teachers engage personally with students as the students enter the room by smiling, saying "hello," and greeting as many as possible by name. Primary teachers sometimes touch students on the head and give them personal greetings.

Many teachers, while circulating among students at work, stop for a moment beside individual students and ask a question or make a positive comment. It is difficult to get around to each student every day, especially for secondary teachers, but you can connect personally with more students than you would imagine. As you do so, make sure to distribute your attention evenly among students.

Discussing Students' Opinions about the Class

You might consider making it routine to discuss class matters with students in an open forum by asking students to review their daily, weekly, or monthly activities, efforts, and progress. This procedure will help you (and the students) appraise their progress while reviewing the topics and activities students have enjoyed, as well as those they have found tedious. You can learn a great deal from this exercise that will help students while making you a better teacher.

If you teach elementary students, set aside a few minutes at the end of each day for students to discuss what they liked best and least in the activities you provided. If you teach secondary students, set aside 15 minutes twice a week for similar reviews. Drop your defenses and let students speak frankly, even if it makes you uncomfortable.

When engaging in this exercise, mention to students that you have feelings, just as they do, and while they should be completely honest, they should speak to you in ways that do not give personal offense. You may have to teach them how to do this by prefacing their remarks with "It might be just me, but . . ." or "I might be wrong, but . . ." or "I was not able to understand exactly why we were doing . . ." Ultimately you will be grateful for what your students teach you in this regard.

Jane Nelsen and Lynn Lott on the Use of Relationship Builders

Jane Nelsen and Lynn Lott, whose contributions on classroom meetings were explored in Chapter 7, have identified five pairs of teacher behaviors that they believe can either nurture or inhibit relationships between teacher and students, depending on how they are used. They call the positive aspect of each pair a *builder* and the negative aspect of each pair a *barrier.* Builders are respectful and encouraging, while barriers are disrespectful and discouraging. As Nelsen and Lott (2000) flatly state,

> We guarantee 100% improvement in student–teacher relationships when teachers simply learn to recognize barrier behaviors and stop demonstrating them. Where else can you get such a generous return for ceasing a behavior? And when the builders are added, the payoff is even greater. (p. 18)

Here are their builders, contrasted with barrier counterparts:

- ***Builder 1: Checking.*** Teachers can establish stronger relations with students if they check in advance to see how students think and feel about class expectations and other matters. The barrier counterpart of checking is teachers' *assuming* they know how students feel and then proceeding from that basis.
- ***Builder 2: Exploring.*** Students relate better to teachers who allow them to explore and perceive situations for themselves and proceed accordingly. The barrier counterpart to exploring is *rescuing/explaining*. Teachers erroneously think they are being helpful when they make lengthy explanations, rescue students from difficulties, or do some of students' work for them. What they should do instead is ask students "What do you need to remember, do, or have in order to take care of yourself?"

- ***Builder 3: Inviting/encouraging.*** To build strong relationships, teachers should invite and encourage students to cooperate, contribute, and be self-directing. For example, the teacher might say, "The bell will ring soon. I would appreciate anything you might do to help get the room straightened up for the next class." The barrier counterpart of inviting/encouraging is *directing*. Teachers do not realize they are being disrespectful when they tell students "Pick that up," "Put that away," or "Straighten up your desk before the bell rings." Such commands build dependence while suppressing initiative and cooperation.
- ***Builder 4: Celebrating.*** Teachers should hold high expectations of students and show they believe in students' potential. They should celebrate student progress that is made evident when students take the initiative, make an effort, persevere, and improve. The barrier counterpart of celebrating is *expecting*. Students become easily discouraged when judged negatively because they have fallen short of expectations, as when teachers say, "I really thought you could do that" or "I thought you were more responsible than that."
- ***Builder 5: Respecting.*** Respect does much to build teacher–student relationships. A teacher shows respect by speaking with students as social equals and without using terms that suggest what students should do. The negative counterpart of respecting is the use of *adultisms,* which are teacher statements that tell students what to do or that sound like parents speaking to naughty children, such as "How come you never . . . ?" or "Why can't you ever . . . ?" or "I can't believe you would do such a thing!" These adultisms produce dependency and guilt rather than initiative and encouragement. If students have not performed up to expectations, the teacher should not admonish them but ask, "What is your understanding of the requirements for this assignment?"

Introducing and Practicing Human Relations Skills

Human relations skills are best introduced and first practiced in class meetings. There, students have a safe venue in which to learn what to say, how to say it, how to use body language, and how to maintain positive feelings during disagreements. Matters concerning what to do when human relations go sour can be discussed and strategies for correcting mistakes can be explored. From class meetings, the new skills can be carried over into actual work sessions.

Periodically, students can discuss how well they were able to maintain a positive focus in class activities when relationships were put under stress. Some authorities such as Jean Piaget (2001) and Alfie Kohn (1996) believe that arguing and squabbling help students develop intellectually and socially. This may be true, but for the sake of educational progress in school, teachers should help students learn to get along without traumatizing themselves and everyone around them.

Human Relations in the Primary Grades

You might wonder if primary-grade children can learn the relational skills discussed so far. Be assured, they are able to comprehend and put into practice practically everything covered to this point. They easily understand the basic concepts in human

relations, such as the "golden rule," taking turns, being nice to others, and getting along without fussing or fighting. Here are examples of how two primary teachers have given attention to personal relations in their classes.

Ruth, a Kindergarten Teacher

Teaching human relations at the early primary level is best done when teachers, students, and parents work together. Young children learn by imitating the behavior of adults in their lives. One parent told me, "I am glad I like the way you act, because Jenny tries to act just like you."

The principal at our school is very good at setting examples of courtesy and friendliness. He stands on the school steps every morning and greets parents, teachers, and students as they arrive. Everybody likes this, and it helps students learn to greet others with a smile and a cheery good morning. Children have said to me about the principal, "I like him; he knows my name."

The importance of relations we maintain with parents cannot be overemphasized. They have a great influence on how effective we can be with the children we teach. I try to cultivate the good will and cooperation of parents. I always follow the golden rule when interacting with them.

For children in my class, I do the following:

1. Talk about how we feel when others push, call us names, or don't play with us.
2. Discuss treating others as we like to be treated. I remind students of this every day.
3. Always speak with students in a tactfully honest and respectful manner, and never embarrass them in front of others.
4. Choose my words carefully. I never accuse them of doing something wrong. That only makes them defensive. I just politely ask, "What could you have done differently?"
5. When two students disagree, I try to help them find a solution that both find acceptable.

When working with parents, here is what I try to do:

1. Choose my words carefully when telling the parent of their child's misbehavior or inadequate performance. I never accuse the child or make the parent feel the situation is their fault. I remember that they see the child as an extension of themselves. Parents will not cooperate with me if I attack or blame their child. The approach I take is suggesting what the parent and I together can do to help the child be more successful.
2. I try to convince the parent that I want the same for their child as they do—a successful school experience.

I have noticed that most teachers exhibit good human relations, but a few do not. Those who do so seem to have better behaved classes and experience less stress.

Cynthia, a Second-Grade Teacher

I begin the class with a discussion about my expectations for the year. I tell the children that I consider them my school "family." I explain that just as in any family we

might not always agree on everything; nonetheless, I will always care about them. I say that each and every one of them is very special and important to me and that I want them to have the best school year possible.

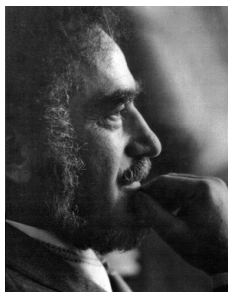
I explain that because they are so important to me, we cannot accept any cruelty or unkindness to each other in our class. I expect them to be the best behaved and well-mannered class in the entire school, both in the classroom and on the playground. I tell them that good behavior is really just good manners, because it shows respect for others, whether they are children or adults. I go over the golden rule and make a bulletin board on that theme. I refer to the golden rule as our class motto. That is the only rule we have in our class. I discuss with them that it is the best guide for getting along with others. I clarify this point further with advice such as "If you don't want to be called names, then don't call other people names," "If you want people to listen to you, then be sure to listen to others," and most important, "If you want to have friends, then be a friend."

The children understand and accept all of this very well. They see it as a fair and sensible way to behave, and I think it helps them know they have a teacher who cares about them.

ENHANCING COMMUNICATION

Earlier it was mentioned that teachers can model and teach to students certain techniques of listening well and communicating clearly, abilities that help stu- dents in school and serve them for a lifetime, yet typically we give these matters little attention. The sections that follow present ideas and advice from Haim Ginott, Stephen Covey, and Thomas Gordon, all renowned experts in the skills of communication.

Haim Ginott on Congruent Communication



Haim G. Ginott (1922–1973)—psychologist, child therapist, parent educator, and author—made contributions of lasting impact concerning how adults should speak with children. Ginott began his career as an elementary teacher in Israel in 1947. After immigrating to the United States, he earned a doctorate in clinical psychology at Columbia University and went on to hold professorships in psychology at Adelphi University and New York University Graduate School. He also served as an UNESCO consultant in Israel, was resident psychologist on the *Today* show, and wrote a weekly syndicated column entitled "Between Us" that dealt with interpersonal communication. His books *Between Parent and Child* (1965), *Between Parent and Teenager* (1967), and *Teacher and Child* (1971) have been translated into over 30 languages and are still very popular.

Ginott's suggestions are unsurpassed for showing respect for children's feelings while setting limits on their behavior. In his book *Teacher and Child,* he illuminated the value of communication and provided tactics that have been incorporated into virtually all systems of discipline in use today. His suggestions relate to the power of teachers, which he described as follows (1971):

> As a teacher I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or dehumanized. (p. 13)

Ginott reminds us that learning always takes place in the present tense, meaning that teachers should not prejudge students or hold grudges. Learning is always a personal matter to students, so teachers of large classes must remember that each student–learner is an individual who must be treated as such. Good communication is the key to working effectively with students.

The style of communication most effective for teachers is *congruent communication,* which addresses situations rather than students' character and is harmonious with students' feelings about situations and themselves. Ginott says that teachers at their best do not preach, moralize, impose guilt, or demand promises. Instead, they confer dignity on their students by treating them as social equals capable of making decisions for themselves. Contrarily, teachers at their worst label students, belittle them, and denigrate their character, although they rarely do so with malicious intent.

Ginott urges teachers conscientiously to avoid comments that do the following:

- Label students by referring to them as *lazy, thoughtless, bad helper, inconsiderate, poor citizen,* and the like.
- Ask rhetorical *why* questions: "Why did you write this so poorly? Why are you two talking? Why am I having to tell you this again?"
- Give moralistic lectures: "You are not making an effort to get along with each other. You will never get anywhere in life if you can't get along with other people."
- Make caustic or sarcastic remarks to students: "I simply don't believe that. You are not telling the truth. I believe that's the fourth time you have 'lost' your assignment."
- Deny students' feelings: "You have no reason to be upset. There is absolutely nothing to worry about."
- Demand students' cooperation: "That's enough fooling around. Get back in your seats and get to work, right now!"
- Show you have lost your temper and self-control: "Don't you dare speak to me like that again! You will be out of this class once and for all!"

Ginott goes on to say that effective teachers do not demand cooperation from their students but rather invite cooperation by describing the situation and indicating what needs to be done: "The noise level has gotten much too high. Let's speak very quietly for the next 10 minutes." They do not dictate to students or boss them around, because those acts too often provoke resistance. Effective teachers have a hidden asset upon which they can always call, which is to ask themselves, How can I be most helpful to my students right now?

Ginott says that teachers should feel free to express anger and other emotions but when doing so should use I-messages rather than you-messages (also stressed by Thomas Gordon and others). Using an I-message, the teacher might say, "I find the noise distracting." Using a you-message, the teacher might say, "You are being too noisy." Ginott said it is also wise to use *laconic language* when responding to or redirecting student misbehavior, meaning language that is brief and to the point.

Ginott also had a great deal to say about praise, and his contentions came as a surprise to teachers who, in the 1970s, were using praise extensively in behavior modification. *Evaluative praise* is worse than none at all, he said, and should never be used. An example of evaluative praise is "Good boy for raising your hand." Instead of evaluative praise, which speaks to a student's character, teachers should use expressions of appreciation for effort, improvement, or accomplishment, without evaluating the student's character or talent. For example, the teacher might say, "I enjoyed your story very much" or "I can almost smell those pine trees in your drawing."

Ginott asked teachers always to respect students' privacy but to indicate that they are available, should students want to talk. As for correcting inappropriate behavior, Ginott simply advised that teachers stop the misbehavior and teach the student the correct way to behave. Ginott placed strong sanctions on sarcasm and punishment, saying that sarcasm is almost always dangerous and should not be used with students. Punishment should not be used at all, as it too often produces hostility, rancor, and vengefulness, while never making students really want to improve.

Teachers, meanwhile, should continually strive for self-discipline in their work. They must be very careful not to display the behaviors they are trying to eradicate in students, such as raising their voice to end noise, acting rude toward students who are being impolite, or berating students who have used inappropriate language.

Finally, Ginott explained that classroom discipline is not accomplished immediately but develops gradually as the teacher—through self-discipline, concern, and helpfulness—promotes students' humaneness and self-control.

Stephen Covey on Empathetic Listening

Stephen R. Covey (1989) provides important advice on how to listen sensitively to others. He believes that we learn to be better listeners when we identify our frame of reference while trying to grasp the frame of reference of the other person. He explains that for many years, he believed that when he spoke, others accurately received the message he was trying to convey to them, since he tried hard to make it very clear. Finally, he realized that what he was trying to convey was framed in his own point of view, not that of the listener, which was sometimes often quite different.

That was when Covey understood that in order to communicate well, you have to understand both your point of view and that of your listeners. The two, he says, are seldom the same. For teachers, that means understanding students' deeper hopes, fears, realities, and difficulties. Given that understanding, you can adjust what you wish to communicate in terms of the student's frame of reference as child or adolescent, rather than

from your frame of reference as an adult teacher. What the student sees as reality often differs substantially from what you consider reality, and matters you consider important may be trivial in the student's view of the world. If teachers are to work well with students, they need to know not just students' thoughts but what those thoughts mean in students' personal existence.

Covey (1989) goes on to say that highly successful people try to understand their listeners *before* they try to make listeners understand them. He writes,

> If I were to summarize in one sentence the single most important principle I have learned in the field of interpersonal relations, it would be this: *Seek first to understand, then to be understood.* This principle is the key to effective interpersonal communication. (p. 237)

He further reminds us,

> Empathetic listening takes time, but it doesn't take anywhere near as much time as it takes to back up and correct misunderstandings when you're already miles down the road, to redo, to live with unexpressed and unsolved problems. . . . People want to be understood. And whatever investment of time it takes to do that will bring much greater returns of time as you work from an accurate understanding of [their] problems and issues. (p. 253)

Thomas Gordon on Removing Roadblocks to Communication

Psychologist Thomas Gordon (1918–2002), a Nobel Prize nominee and recipient of numerous awards, is author of the acclaimed *Parent Effectiveness Training* (1970), *Teacher Effectiveness Training* (1987), and *Discipline That Works* (1989). He pioneered the teaching of communication skills and conflict resolution to parents, teachers, youth, and managers of organizations worldwide. Over 2 million people have been trained by his organization.

One of Gordon's major contributions to communication is his identification of 12 types of comments teachers make that seem a reasonable part of teaching but that actually stifle communication with students. He calls the comments "roadblocks to communication." For example, imagine that student Dale is supposed to be writing a composition in class. Dale learned just last night his parents intend to separate. He didn't sleep much and now can't concentrate on the assignment. Dale could use some comfort and kindness, but Mr. Askew does not detect his need. Mr. Askew thinks Dale is procrastinating, which he sometimes does. Mr. Askew asks Dale what the problem is. Dale shrugs and says "Nothing." Then he adds that he doesn't understand how to do the assignment.

The following are examples of typical teacher comments that Mr. Askew might make to get Dale going but that will have the opposite effect. They will discourage Dale and make him unwilling to talk further. They are what Gordon means by "roadblocks to communication."

Giving orders. "Dale, you get busy. I think you know how to do that composition. No more wasting time. Get your name and date on your paper and get to work."

Warning. "Dale, I'm telling you for the last time to get to work. If you don't, you'll be taking that home with you tonight along with a note to your parents."

Preaching. "Dale, you know you are expected to complete all your work. We are not doing this for the fun of it. It's for your own good. Don't you see that? If you don't try to learn this, you're never going to write well at all. You will never look like an educated person."

Advising. "Dale, let me give you a piece of advice. When I was younger, I was much like you, never doing what I was capable of. A good teacher got me out of that. He told me to set some personal goals for myself and work toward them, step by step. I think you'd benefit from that. I'd like you to come up with a plan such as that and see if it doesn't help."

Criticizing. "Dale, I can't believe you are fooling around again. Didn't we just talk about this last week? You have ability but you are not using it. I'm really disappointed in you."

Questioning. "What's wrong, Dale? You have been sitting here 10 minutes and still have nothing on that paper. You aren't even trying. Do you think something bad is going to happen if you write a few lines? What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

Comments like the ones Mr. Askew makes to Dale are commonly heard in classrooms, but they rarely help. In cases such as Dale's, they are likely to make the student grow more distant, feel worse, and become less inclined to approach the teacher. What could Mr. Askew have said to Dale that would have been more helpful? Consider the following responses. Note how they provide encouragement, rather than find fault:

"Dale, we need to get this assignment completed by the end of the period."

"Writing is not easy, is it? Many people have a difficult time at first. Let's see if we can begin with a title. What would your composition be about?"

"Sometimes we feel like working, and sometimes we can't seem to do it. We might be tired or our minds might be very much bothered by something. Do you ever have feelings like that?"

"Dale, I can tell you are having difficulty getting started. Is there something about the assignment that bothers you? I'd like to help resolve it, if there is."

"Dale, I feel something is not right for you. I don't want to pry. If you feel like talking, I'll listen now, or I'll be here in this room right after school if you want to drop by."

You see the point Gordon was making. The following statements indicate further why "roadblock" comments are usually counterproductive:

"Dale, you are being inconsiderate of me and your classmates." (Labeling or calling names in this manner tends to make students withdraw.)

"Dale, why am I having to tell you all this again?" (Rhetorical questions usually come across as scolding.)

"Dale, you will never get anywhere if you don't improve your attitude." (Students interpret moralizing as degradation of their character.)

"How odd, Dale. This is the third time this month you haven't 'felt like' doing your work." (Sarcasm punishes students and questions their character.)

"Don't be silly, Dale. There is absolutely nothing difficult about this assignment." (Such reassurance denies the student's legitimate feelings.)

"That's enough fooling around, Dale. Pick up your pencil and get to work." (Demands never make students truly want to do their assignments.)

"Dale, you pay attention to what I'm saying! I am the teacher in this room, and you darned well better remember it! (Losing your temper and self-control presents a negative impression and makes students wary of you.)

Consider teaching your students about these roadblocks to communication, how they can be avoided, and how they can be replaced with comments that attract cooperation. Students should be helped to understand that when others are worried or have made a mistake, the best thing they can do is try to help them in a positive manner.

Why You Should Not Argue with Students

When students complain about assignments or make excuses, many teachers move from a helping mode to a confronting mode. They don't want to listen to student comments they consider ill mannered and untrue, and they don't want to accept the seemingly bogus explanations students sometimes make to avoid responsibility. Teachers' natural inclination is to dispute what students say—to argue with them, in other words. However, that is a trap teachers should assiduously avoid.

We are speaking of the kind of arguing in which one person tries to convince the other of a particular point of view by means of logic (or louder voice or fiercer demeanor). When teachers argue this way with students, they almost never bring students to their point of view or cause them to see the logic or purpose behind their belief. That is because when people argue, they put up defenses against the other person and dig in their heels. After expending much emotional energy, they usually end up more firmly convinced of their opinion than they were before. Meanwhile, the argumentation batters feelings and puts an end to willing cooperation. As Dale Carnegie (1981) said, "There is only one way under high heaven to get the best of an argument—and that is to avoid it. Avoid it as you would avoid rattlesnakes and earthquakes" (p. 116).

What, then, should you do when disagreements arise between you and your students or between students? The best course of action, which should be taught and practiced, is for each side honestly to consider the other's point of view. Calm and reason might lead one of the disputants to see he or she has made an error, and the

matter can end there. More realistically, the resolution process can identify a working middle ground that allows cooperation to continue. Teachers can help students learn to seek the middle ground in disputes. This skill lends itself well to role-playing, and students have a lot of fun with it.

You might consider teaching students to do the following:

1. Take turns listening carefully to the other person. Keep calm. Hear the person out, and wait your turn. Don't interrupt to deny or contradict what he or she says.
2. Drop your defenses. If you are offended, resist the impulse to strike back. Try for understanding.
3. Don't tell the other person he or she is wrong. Doing so will be seen as an insult to the person's intelligence, perception, or reasoning ability.
4. After the other person has had a say, you can reply, "I have listened carefully, and believe I understand your point of view. I am often wrong, but . . ." Then briefly state your position. Tell the other person you would like to find a middle ground that makes sense to both sides. If that is not possible, set the matter aside and agree to disagree in a friendly manner.

This is not to say teachers should never try to change students' minds. One of teachers' main duties is to open up new ideas and help students see different points of view. They will change their interests and opinions if they see reasons to do so. Instead of arguing, make your points clear through modeling, examples, and anecdotes. Allow others to state their views. As Ben Franklin said, if you argue and rankle and contradict, you may achieve a victory sometimes, but it will be an empty victory because you will never get your opponent's goodwill.

A Brief Self-Appraisal Guide Concerning Student Involvement

When you work closely with students, you want to make sure you interact with all of them equally, as much as possible. Students who are reticent or timid often get left out of class discussions and question and answer activities.

To help involve everyone, consider using the following descriptors as a personal guide. You might wish to devote at least one classroom meeting to discussing these descriptors with your students. Tell students why the descriptor topics are important to you as a teacher, and explain the benefits they can provide to class members:

1. The teacher contacts and involves all students in the class and gives them time to respond.
2. All students have an equal opportunity to volunteer to answer teacher questions.
3. All students seem willing to express their opinions freely in class.
4. Students inform the teacher when they do not understand what is being said or taught, so the teacher can reteach or explain in another way.
5. Students listen quietly when the teacher and classmates speak and seem intent on understanding the speaker correctly.

6. Students are able to *paraphrase* what has been said, or put concepts and ideas into their own words.
7. Students do not seem afraid or embarrassed to misspeak or make mistakes.
8. The teacher often organizes paired discussions and small-group discussion sessions in which all students can participate.
9. The teacher uses effective body language in maintaining connections with all students in the classroom.
10. Students participate actively in communicating class activities to parents.
11. Students participate in classroom meetings where they voice concerns and suggestions about class matters.

Communicating with Students' Parents and Guardians

Maintaining considerate communication with your students' parents or guardians is not only a professional duty but also a tactic that can bring rich rewards. Parents have a need and a right to know about your program for their children, how their children are progressing, what their strengths are, what difficulties they may be experiencing, and how you intend to help. If you tactfully maintain communication with parents on these matters, they will usually give you considerable support and spread the word that you are a good teacher who cares.

There are several ways to communicate with parents. Use the telephone if you need to talk with them about private matters. For information about the class and its activities, send out a newsletter. Better yet, establish a class page on the Internet where you can post pictures, schedules, requirements, activities, and other information. Give the newsletter or webpage a professional appearance. From third grade on, students can provide much of the content, which you should edit and organize. The postings should show photos of students at work. Try to mention all your students by name over time. Parents like that, and so do students.

Doing these things takes time, but they are good for communication and provide an excellent activity for students. Setting up a website is easy. Most schools now encourage this practice and have personnel who can help you get the site going.

What Parents Need to Know from You. Parents need to know a number of things about their child in school, but once the child progresses beyond the first two or three years, most parents shy away from close involvement with teachers. Many feel they shouldn't meddle. Others feel insecure about approaching the teacher. In any case, they have the need and the right to be informed about such things as the following:

- The educational program provided in your class—a summary of your curriculum and the subject-area standards, materials being used, and typical instructional activities
- The expectations you hold for their child, including classwork, behavior, homework, makeup work, and so forth

- How their child is doing in school, both generally ("Does good work"; "Is a good citizen") and specifically ("Has improved from 75 percent correct to 85 percent correct in math")
- Any specific problems their child is having
- Special activities in which their child will be involved

Parents who speak with you personally will usually want to know things that are specific only to their child:

- Does my child seem happy?
- How does my child get along with others?
- How does my child react to trying new things? To making mistakes?
- What is my child best at? What is my child weakest in?
- Does my child cause problems?
- What after-school opportunities are there for my child?

Be ready to supply this information when parents request it. Also, realize that it will be difficult for them to accept anything that might sound negative about their child. Be honest but tactful in your comments. Be ready to back them up with evidence, and have some potential solutions in mind. Parents will often make comments such as these:

> "He never was that way before" (to which you say, "I hope I can count on your help, because I know you don't want him behaving this way.")
>
> "She was well liked in her other school" (to which you say, "She will be well liked here, too, if together we encourage her to be more friendly to others. I'm sure with your help we can.")
>
> "He is just like his father, who has never learned to pick up after himself" (to which you say, "Let's see if we can work on this. Can I count on your help?")
>
> "Her mother is the same way—just loves to talk" (to which you say, "I really like her. It's just that her talking often disturbs the class and keeps her from getting her work done. I'm sure you want her to learn, just as I do.")

Conferencing with Parents or Guardians. From time to time, you can expect to conference privately with parents or guardians, either as a scheduled event or in response to a particular need or situation. The following suggestions can help you prepare for such conferences:

- In advance, prepare a folder with the student's name written on it attractively. In the folder, include (1) a summary of work covered to date, (2) a profile of the student's performance in that work, (3) samples of the student's work, good and bad, (4) tests, grade book, and other evidence pertinent to the conference, and (5) notes to remind you of anecdotes that provide insight into the student's behavior and progress.

- When the parent/guardian arrives, greet him or her in a friendly, relaxed manner. Ask him or her to sit beside you at a table, rather than on the other side of a desk. This conveys a message of cooperation.
- Begin by chatting about the child as a worthwhile person. Mention good traits. This reassures the parent/guardian.
- Guide the parent/guardian through the student's folder, commenting on its contents.
- Encourage the parent/guardian to talk. Listen carefully. Be accepting. Don't argue or criticize. Don't expect the person to be completely objective about the child.
- Show that you want the best for the child, just as the parent/guardian does.
- If appropriate, work with the parent/guardian to create a home action plan that will benefit the child.
- End the conference by describing your plans for the student's future progress. Earnestly request the parent/guardian's support. Thank him or her for talking with you about the child.

IN SUMMARY

All classrooms function better when students and teachers relate and communicate well with each other. This chapter provided a number of tactics for improving relationships and communication skills in classrooms. Emphasized were general skills of human relations, habits that help people connect with each other, tactics that help build relationships, empathetic listening, avoiding "roadblocks" to communication, other skills in communicating with students, and points to consider in communicating with parents. Haim Ginott's colossal insights on congruent communication were featured.

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