

# 1 *Creating a Caring Community*

*When you smile at life, half the smile is for your face, the other half is for somebody else's.*

—Tibetan saying

Caring Teacher Discipline is most effective when it takes place in the context of a caring classroom community. All classrooms are communities, but not all classrooms are caring communities. What makes a classroom community a caring community? When everyone—teachers, students, and parents—feels a sense of belonging and connectedness to each other. When everyone is treated with kindness, respect, and helpfulness. When everyone has a mutual sense of responsibility.

Relationships are the key. As teachers, we determine the nature of the relationships in our community; creating caring classroom relationships requires intention and conscious planning on our part. We must plan how we relate to parents and students and how we help students relate to each other so that we can ensure that everyone feels valued, accepted, and respected. It is in everyone's best interest—ours, our students', and their parents'—to create caring communities in our classrooms. This is a win-win situation.

## ***Caring Classroom Relationships: A Win-Win Situation***

No Child Left Behind has created so much pressure on teachers that many of us feel we have no time for anything except academics. However,

research has proven that positive, caring interpersonal classroom relationships can actually increase motivation and academic achievement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Wentzel, 1999, 2002). One teacher delightedly reported to me, "One of the strong points of this approach is that it carries over to all subjects."

In fact, the impact of caring classroom relationships is so powerful that a connection has even been found between students' relationships with their kindergarten teachers and their achievement scores all the way through middle school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Teaching can be stressful for us. Anything that can reduce this stress is worth trying. Caring relationships with teachers make caring, empathy, and compassion more likely in students, thereby reducing our stress (Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005). Solid teacher-student relationships prevent some discipline problems from ever happening and make it easier to deal with those that do arise.

Caring relationships with parents and caregivers can also reduce our stress. When parents feel warmth and acceptance from us, they will be more likely to partner with us to help their children when problems arise rather than attacking us with defensive aggressiveness or hostility. Many parents report that learning how to cooperate with others and live in a community at school has transferred to their homes; their children get along better with each other and are more cooperative at home as a result. One child told his teacher, "I used to be mean to my brothers, but now I'm much nicer."

A positive relationship with a teacher can be transformative for children with special needs. Children with developmental vulnerabilities and a close teacher relationship have been found to be significantly better off than similar peers who lacked such relationships (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Positive teacher relationships can even have an effect on biology. Stress levels of emotionally disturbed special education students were shown to be lower for those who had close, emotionally supportive relationships with their teachers (Little & Kobak, 2003).

Yes, this is indeed a win-win situation for everyone: parents, students, teachers, and society at large. To succeed with designing a caring community, a helpful mantra for us as we make classroom decisions and interact with others would be "How does this affect classroom relationships?"

### ***Creating a Caring Community: A Necessity for Our Times***

For a variety of reasons, people today tend to be more isolated from each other, both physically and socially. Urban sprawl and increased mobility

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separate us physically from one another, having two-career families often limits our time for socializing, and technology can put us into a trance in which we are oblivious to those around us. Thus, our times demand more intentionality in building relationships with others (Putnam, Feldstein, & Cohen, 2004). That's why allowing children to participate in building a community in a classroom where they feel valued, connected, and responsible is so important.

### *Establishing Caring Relationships With Our Students*

#### **Modeling**

Behavior is contagious. Our brains contain mirror neurons, which reflect back actions we see in someone else. Biology predisposes us to mirror the actions of those we see around us (Perry, 2006, p. 240). Accordingly, children do as we do. If, as caring teachers, we treat them with kindness and respect and make them feel that they matter, they will mimic us and learn to treat others that way as well. Research has proven that teachers who care unconditionally for their students, who accept them for who they are with no strings attached, can have a lifelong positive influence on their character (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2006; Delpit, 1996; Kohn, 1998). Keep in mind that modeling is a terrific tool for building relationships and teaching our students discipline, but it's also a tricky tool. There are two sides to the coin. Students mimic our undesirable behaviors as well as our noble ones.

Sometimes we don't realize that we are sending out two conflicting messages to our students when we tell them to act one way but model another way. We may interrupt them while punishing them for interrupting us. One of my children was answering a question when her teacher interrupted her to say something. When my daughter, thinking that the teacher was through, resumed what she had been saying, the teacher admonished my daughter for interrupting her. We may yell at students while exhorting them not to yell. Actions speak louder than words. When a conflict arises between what we say and what we do, our students will usually copy what we do rather than what we say.

#### **Respecting**

Respect is like a boomerang. If we send it out, we will get it back, usually. If we send out disrespect, we'll get that back. Being "dissed"

causes kids to lash out at whoever dissed them. Disrespect triggers rage and an uncontrollable urge to send the disrespect right back where it came from, especially with vulnerable students who are already at risk and who feel hopeless and helpless about their lives. Mutual respect is our goal.

Even when we do send out messages of respect, we cannot realistically expect that our students will always treat us with respect. Many factors can get in the way; they may want to look cool in front of their friends, they may be frustrated and angry, and they may lose control. We must confront these situations directly when they occur. However, if we treat our students respectfully, these situations will be few and far between and can be dealt with constructively.

Respect means treating our students as we would want to be treated. We don't like to be yelled at, humiliated, threatened, or spoken to sarcastically, so why should our students? Children are quite fragile and depend on us to help them build up self-confidence and courage to face the world. Respect and self-respect go hand in hand.

Listening is an essential component of caring, respectful behavior. When teachers listen to students and relate to them with understanding, they are demonstrating caring behaviors necessary for peaceful functioning in the classroom community (Elias et al., 1997). When teachers are non-judgmental and are open to students' ideas and opinions even when they disagree with them, they are helping students develop self-confidence. When teachers are warm and trusting, they are helping students develop a sense of self-worth and responsibility. When teachers perform small acts of kindness such as sending a child a birthday card or bringing in a newspaper article of interest to the student, they are showing students concrete ways to care for others. In fact, these simple acts of caring can remove cross-cultural communication barriers (Ladson-Billings, 1997). In addition, expressing concern for others in distress and taking the initiative to help can set a powerful example and be even more effective than didactic instruction in promoting a sense of caring in students (Kohn, 1998). When teachers care enough to be allies with students, partnering to solve problems, they are helping students develop a sense of responsibility. Actions, not lectures, are the key.

### **Persevering**

Have you ever taught students you found to be totally unappealing? With whom you found it challenging to relate? Perhaps they're confrontational or sarcastic, or perhaps they remind you of someone you couldn't stand. It's only human. At one time or another, we have all

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taught students like that. Unfortunately, some of the children who need our attention and support the most—those for whom we can have the greatest positive influence—act so offensively that we may give up on them. But particularly in these cases, for everyone's sake, it's important to put in some extra effort to establish a positive relationship, challenging though it may be. Not only will it make your life easier in the long run, but also you may be saving that child from eventual failure (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Others probably have given up on him as well; he's lost unless someone puts in that extra effort to care.

A beginning strategy is to send positive verbal messages and convey interest even if you feel as if the words are sticking in your throat: "Nice to see you," "Welcome back; hope you had a nice weekend," "Great effort," "Could you help me with . . . ?" It may take a while, but eventually you will see results in both your attitude and the student's.

Sometimes more is needed than typical classroom interactions to improve relationships. One strategy is called  $2 \times 10$ , in which a teacher commits to two uninterrupted, undivided minutes a day for 10 consecutive days to build a relationship (Mendler, 2001). During this time, behavior is not corrected, and the child is not told what to do to succeed. Some relationships are hard to establish and others can easily get off track, but this gift of time, even just a minute or two of undivided, positive attention, can be restorative.

A more focused approach is presented in the Students, Teachers, and Relationship Support Team (STARST) program. This program involves a technique called "banking time," which is designed to enhance a teacher's relationship with a specific child so that capital can be drawn during stressful times (Pianta & Hamre, 2001). Key features of this program are setting regularly scheduled interaction sessions that are not contingent on good behavior, allowing the child to lead the activity or discussions while we are the follower or listener, conveying a message of safety and support, and diverting the focus from performance skills.

### ***Establishing Caring Relationships Among Our Students***

Caring, positive relationships among our students make for a more peaceful classroom with fewer discipline problems. In fact, good relationships with peers are a protective factor that helps build children's resilience; mutual friendships can reduce the probability of maladjustment (Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). When our

students get along with each other and feel as if they are an important part of the classroom community, it is more likely that they will perform better academically (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Wentzel, 1999). In fact, in *Understanding by Design*, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) identify understanding another's perspective and responding empathetically as a central component for learning subject matter.

### Communication

Using the vocabulary of relationships to communicate with our students can put students in a frame of mind for getting along better with each other (Johnston, 2006): "Let's *collaborate* to figure out how we can tackle this problem," "If we do this, how will it affect our *community*?" "How can we treat each other with *respect*?" "What does *respect* look like?" "How can we act *responsibly* in this situation?"

How we praise students also affects how they relate to each other. "I like the way Anna is sitting so quietly" may not enamor Anna to her classmates. See pages 45 through 53 for a detailed discussion on praise. Rewards can backfire as well, causing disharmony among students. When the whole class loses a reward and is penalized because one or two students make noise, resentments fester. For more on rewards and their impact on community dynamics, see pages 58 and 59.

Listening respectfully and carefully is the other aspect of communication that can help our students connect with each other. Listening activities in which students try to figure out how someone is thinking can be integrated into subjects such as music, literature, and history. See Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of communication.

### Collaboration

We can design structured classroom opportunities that facilitate better relationships among students. Discussions on rules (Chapter 3), class meetings where students make decisions (Chapter 2), and problem solving (Chapter 8) all fall into this category. Another way to help students learn how to get along with each other is to design a classroom chore chart that includes relationship-building chores such as helping to orient new students and contacting someone who is absent to check in on them and give them the homework.

In order to learn how to get along with each other, students need to interact directly with each other. Small group activities (two to five children) provide an opportunity for students to build relationships while

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doing school work. There's an art to designing classroom group activities that foster good relationships among our students.

- *Deciding group composition:* Some topics lend themselves to homogeneous grouping, where everyone is at the same ability level. Drill and practice, such as practicing math skills, and learning new challenging material fall into this category. Heterogeneous grouping works well for open-ended activities, tasks that involve divergent thinking, such as brainstorming ideas for a community service project. By using a mixture of homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping, we help our students develop a variety of relationships.
- *Teaching group skills:* In order for students to collaborate with each other and get along in the process, it's helpful to teach them some group skills in advance and practice them with modeling and role plays: how to talk in quiet voices, how to listen with both eyes and ears (one person speaks at time while others look at that person), how to disagree constructively and respectfully without embarrassing anyone publicly ("I disagree with that because . . ."), how to resolve conflicts when they arise using problem solving (see Chapter 8), and how to provide others with positive feedback ("That's an interesting idea").
- *A note of caution about grading:* Grading group work can create disharmony among our students and be counterproductive. "It's all his fault that I got a bad grade. He didn't do his share of the work." Figuring out how not to penalize a diligent student because of a slacker in the group is essential for keeping good relationships among our students.

The Caring School Community Program from the Developmental Studies Center provides an excellent model for designing cooperative learning situations for students that are truly cooperative rather than competitive. See Resource B for further information on this program and others.

Community service projects can also develop good peer relations and the ethic of care. Whether students adopt a younger class to read to once a week, participate in a schoolwide beautification program, or undertake a project to improve their local community, they learn to pull together, work cooperatively toward a common goal, and develop caring and empathy for each other in the process. They also learn the joys of reaching out to help others, and their self-worth receives a tremendous boost. They think, "I'm needed," "I'm wanted." For a wealth of ideas for social service and community projects, see Barbara Lewis's *The Kid's Guide to Social Action* (1998) and *The Kid's Guide to Service Projects: Over 500 Service Ideas for Young People Who Want to Make a Difference* (1995).

Service learning is yet another venue for caring and building positive relationships among students. Students undertake projects directly tied to learning objectives in which they use their skills in real-life situations to improve their community. They learn to work together and share a common goal with their classmates. Because a variety of skills are needed, students learn to see each other in a different light and appreciate each other's strengths. Service learning differs from community service in that it is more structured, is integrated into the classroom curriculum, and entails more sustained involvement. It too fosters a sense of caring and connectedness to the community. For further information on service learning, see *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, & Social Action* by Cathryn Berger Kaye (2003).

### ***Engaging Parents as Partners in Discipline***

Parents\* are the greatest influence in their children's lives. After all, parents are their children's first and most enduring teachers. Although we are professionally trained teachers for all children, parents are experientially trained teachers for their own children. They are an integral part of a classroom community. Doesn't it make sense for parents and teachers to work as partners?

Forming this partnership is sometimes challenged by a tension that often exists between parents and teachers—a rivalry over ownership of the child. On one hand, as teachers we may feel that because we have objectivity and professional knowledge we know what's best for the child. On the other hand, parents may feel that because they live with their child day in and day out they're the ones who know what's best for their child. But as we know, two heads are better than one. By setting aside our rivalries and pooling our knowledge of children in two contexts, we can accomplish what is truly best for the child.

### **Building the Partnership**

Because many parents are intimidated by our expertise and by the fact that, as teachers, we hold the power of authority, shouldn't we take the first step toward establishing a parent-teacher partnership? In fact, we are

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\*The title *parent* is used in this book to refer to whoever has assumed the responsibilities of a parent for the child. It may be a biological parent, a grandparent, a foster parent, or any other adult who has assumed caregiving responsibility.

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mandated to do so by the standards of our own professional organizations and by No Child Left Behind. We can lead up to a partnership by first putting parents at ease and making them feel welcome in our classrooms. Of course, open houses at the beginning of the year help us get to know each other. But because the parents of our most challenging students often do not show up on these occasions for whatever reason, why not be creative and try to establish a bond with them in other ways? There are many ways to form partnerships with parents, and each of us should choose those that work best in our particular community setting. Keep in mind that it is important to not ignore parents who are not literate in English. Here are a few suggestions:

*Videotapes:* Make videotapes with the students in which the students and the teacher talk to parents and describe what goes on in class. Film regular class activities or perhaps even highlight individual children doing something special.

*Newsletters:* Prepare chatty weekly newsletters in which teachers and students describe class activities. This keeps parents informed and connected. If everyone has access to a computer (either at home or in a library), these can be sent in e-mails and placed on the school's Web site.

*Requests for help:* Ask parents for help with something that they could do at home. Cutting out shapes, typing a letter, or doing art work, for example, makes parents feel important and needed.

*Dialogue journals:* Open a dialogue between teachers and parents via a journal that is sent home daily or weekly. The purpose of the journal is to discuss what the child is learning at home and school as well as special home and school events. This is not the place to discuss the child's daily behavior.

*Homework:* Assign homework for which parents are the experts, such as talking about their experiences as a child, their work, or their travel. Or assign homework in which all the parent has to do is listen to the child tell or read a story. This will help draw parents into classroom life.

*Classes for parents:* Conduct classes before and after school to teach parents new skills.

*Games to play at home:* Send home suggestions for a game or group activity that relates to what is being studied at school.

*Class invitations:* Invite parents to class celebrations where they can share a special skill or experience with the class, such as ethnic cooking or customs, unusual life experiences, a craft, or information about their profession. This can help forge a strong link with parents and is a

wonderful opportunity to provide multicultural experiences for our students.

*Family nights:* The Child Development Project suggests nights when school learning activities are structured so that parents and children can participate together and share what they learn. Family read-aloud, science, math, and film nights are among the suggestions they spell out in their *Homeside Activities*.

*Parent-teacher conferences:* Work with parents to set goals for their children.

*Home visits:* Visit parents and children in their homes.

Two very good parent involvement resources are *Building Successful Partnerships* (National PTA, 2000) and the Caring School Community Program, produced by the Developmental Studies Center (see Resource B).

### **Partnering With Parents When Problems Arise**

Once we've established a rapport with parents, it will be much easier to partner with them if discipline problems arise. Putting our heads together with parents when a student has a persistent or serious behavior problem is often the best route to a solution: "I'm concerned that Fran has been getting into many fights lately. I wonder if we could get together to see if we can help her with this problem." "I'm concerned" lets a parent know that we care; "to see if we can help her" lets a parent know we are putting the parent on equal footing and want to create a working alliance. Let's keep in mind the parents' point of view. If we start out by criticizing their children, they probably will feel as if we are criticizing them.

Problem solving can guide our conversation (see Chapter 8). The first step is to listen. If we first listen to parents describe the child's life outside school, we can gain tremendous insight. Our approach can be that of information gatherer, not advice giver (Morrow, 1987). When we are speaking with a parent, perhaps he or she will describe a similar problem at home: "I notice that Fran is fighting with her sister more often." Or perhaps the parent will mention that a relative is ill or that the parents are splitting up.

Then we can work together to help their child and find a positive resolution to the problem. An underlying assumption when working with parents should be that we don't tell them how to run their households and they don't tell us how to run our classrooms.

Together we can brainstorm to figure out how to help their child overcome his or her problem. Keep in mind that some parents may deny that their child has a problem anyplace other than in the classroom. In that

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case, we can just focus on the classroom problem. Even if we are quite sure that the parents are denying the truth, debating with them can be counter-productive to establishing a partnership.

Sometimes it may be appropriate to problem solve together with both the student and the parents. The key to the success of this process is that all participants should be on an equal footing, all with the same positive intentions for the child.

But shouldn't problem solving go both ways? The ideal would be for parents to also feel comfortable coming to us with problems they see at home. "My daughter has been coming home lately saying that she hates school" is best addressed by listening and then partnering with the parent to solve the problem rather than getting defensive and thinking that the parent is accusing us of poor teaching. When I taught second grade, one of my students became school phobic. My first instinct was to interpret the mother's concern about this problem as an accusation that something was amiss at school. However, by staying calm and listening, we were able to trace back to the origin of the school phobia and realized that it had nothing to do with school but rather with the child's mother's suddenly leaving town to attend her grandfather's funeral.

At times, we may have to be cautious about how much information we give parents and how we convey this information. Some parents will punish their children at home even though we have already addressed the behavior in school. That's double jeopardy for the child. Some parents will be harsh and punitive if we ask them to help their children with homework. Listening carefully to parents and sizing them up will help us regulate the nature of our partnership so that it works in the best interest of the student.

### **Partnering With Abusive or Neglectful Parents**

Of course, if we have reasonable cause to suspect abuse or neglect, we are both legally and morally bound to report it. But because many children remain with the abusive or neglectful parent because of a strong emphasis on keeping families together and working to support them, we still have to work with these parents. Although we may find the actions of such parents reprehensible, isn't it in the best interest of children for us to establish a positive relationship with their parents? If we let our anger get the best of us, and we treat these parents with hostility, their children may be placed at greater risk. If we assume a nurturing posture, giving these parents encouragement and positive feedback while also giving them specific positive strategies for relating to their children, we may ease the burden on their children. Isolation is a common characteristic of abusive and