

## **Practicing What We Teach: Developing Children's Behavior by What We Say and Do**

*by Dr. Donna Riter*

In my graduate course this past summer, I asked my students to share with me what they remembered most about a teacher they would consider a favorite and what they remembered most about a teacher who left them with a negative feeling about themselves, their work or their abilities. With very little hesitation, the students came up with a list of characteristics and behaviors that created positive memories for them and ones that caused them to wonder if that person standing in the front of the room proclaiming themselves as their teacher had ever enjoyed their job or even liked children.

My students recalled that the best teachers they knew entered their classrooms like eager travelers. Their suitcases were packed with enthusiasm, creativity, encouragement, realistic goals, sensitivity, a sense of humor, true knowledge of their content and the ability to make each student feel as if they mattered. The teachers they most wanted to forget arrived on the scene like the "Grim Reaper." These teachers entered the classroom with few goals and expectations for themselves, and even less for their students. They were always able to make a bad day even worse by listing reasons why only some would survive the school year journey. These teachers made it clear that only one opinion would matter in THEIR classroom and that spontaneous joy or laughter could get you sent "straight to the office." They also mentioned that no one in THEIR classroom was considered unique so if you did not understand something, then there must be something wrong with you. My students said they wondered why these adults had entered the profession of teaching to begin with, since they gave the impression to kids that anywhere in the world would have been a step up from being stuck in a classroom.

If only they had been asked, what an incredible insight my graduate students could have offered their teachers in helping them (the teachers) recognize that anything they said or did within earshot or visual range of their students would serve as a model for future behavior. These teachers would have learned from their students, that when they reinforced, applauded and identified their students' strengths, they made those students feel good about who they were and what they could

accomplish. However, when a teacher accentuated, ridiculed or berated a student about their mistakes or weaknesses, they felt like failures willing to give up rather than be embarrassed by trying again in front of the teacher or their peers. Keeping in mind that eighty-five to ninety percent of what we communicate to our students is non-verbal (Mehrabian 1969), it will not just be what we say to students that puts a negative spin on their school memories but also, what we do. Since there is not a full length mirror that runs from one corner of the classroom to the other or a film crew recording our every action or word, we seldom “see” ourselves as the students “see” us. It is easy to become more distracted or concerned about the content or the curriculum and the schedule than the message that our words and body language may be sending to the students (I remember a time, while teaching second grade, when I was trying to encourage my students to take some risks in their learning. I told them that if they made a mistake, it was part of the learning process and OK. All they would need to do on their papers to fix things would be to cross out the error, not erase everything or do the whole paper over. However, each time I made a mistake on the board, I would erase it. It wasn’t until one student asked me why it was OK for him to make mistakes but not me, that I realized I was not modeling what I was trying to teach).

With this thought fresh in my mind, I decided to take a closer look at some verbal and non-verbal communications that take place in the classroom which can easily give students the wrong signals translating into messages that are very contrary to what was intended.

### **Responsible Time Management**

Teaching a student responsibility to deadlines is an important skill for future employment, household management, social obligations etc. Therefore, the teacher who is prepared to begin class when the bell (or the clock) indicates, corrects papers in a timely manner, and is organized and knows where materials are for lessons, effectively models for his/her students what the expectation is for corresponding behavior from them (arriving to class on time, meeting homework deadlines and knowing where their work and materials are located). Students will not understand if the adult model (in this case the teacher) attempts to set a different standard for themselves than for the student. For example, the teacher may come to work and say to a supervisor or colleague, “My car wouldn’t start and

that's why I was late this morning." "I didn't get all the papers corrected or my grades in on time because I had an unforeseen family emergency," or "I don't have all the materials with me today because I left my folders at home" and assume that since these are all what we refer to as "reality stressors" (things that should not go wrong but do), they are legitimate reasons and should therefore be accepted without further thought or discussion. Yet when a student comes to class late or unprepared as a result of an event that they may consider legitimate (conflicting activities, family issues, illness, couldn't remember their locker combination), they may be greeted by a stern reprimand or even a consequence of some kind for not meeting the expectation. Not to say there will be equal comparisons (student to teacher) at all times, but there are instances when understanding the students' needs for flexibility (in reference to how we weigh out our own) comes from our capacity to correlate our own day to day problems that may require similar flexibility. What if the teacher not only recognized the plausibility of the reality stressors faced by students but was willing to work at lowering the student's anxiety level. The teacher demonstrates recognition and understanding that things do not always go as planned, mistakes are made and that we can learn from those moments and they do not signify the end of the world. The student can then begin to see that we all have a lot on our plates and just as he/she needed understanding, consideration and flexibility on the part of the teacher because of a legitimate circumstance (i.e. lack of information, poor organizational skills, illness or family emergency), the adult will expect that same consideration and adaptability from them. This becomes a lesson by the teacher, for the student, on "giving and taking" just through modeling.

### **Respect for Individuals**

As teachers, we choose a concentration for our studies and then develop our future goals based on our choices. We want to have the knowledge and skill necessary to make us comfortable within the classroom environment. A music teacher for example, wants his/her job responsibilities to center around what he/she knows in respect to music. Whether it is playing an instrument, talking about composers, practicing rhythms, learning the names of the notes, ear training, or conducting a piece, the music teacher is within his/her element because this is what they have studied, practiced and prepared for during college. There is commitment and enthusiasm for the subject material because it is what they are good at, what they

know, and above all, what they derive personal pleasure from doing. (i.e. even if the music teacher has a bad day with the kids and the lesson, he/she does not stop loving music). If we took that same music teacher and placed him/her in a chemistry class to instruct, he/she would be more apprehensive than enthusiastic, more confused than prepared and more overwhelmed than knowledgeable about that subject. He/she would have to learn new skills and have a different knowledge base to handle that assignment. What if the student does not have that commitment and enthusiasm that was assumed and expected because he/she may do very well in math class but has a hard time in English or may be the star athlete in the physical education class but have very little confidence when doing an art project? What if that child can be heard clear across the playground during recess but cannot be heard above a whisper when attempting to read orally in front of peers during social studies? If I am willing to make an incredible commitment of time and energy to be a quality teacher in my chosen field, then I should be able to model that dedication to learning to my students. Teaching that is oriented toward all students having the same knowledge base and the same performance rates across the board, fails to recognize the uniqueness of the learner. The real gift of understanding the correlation between our model for becoming a teacher and how we apply that to our teaching, is by being able to see each student as we see ourselves. Each of us, like the students we teach, are like snowflakes arriving in different size, different shapes, crystallizing at different temperatures and different rates, unique and one of a kind. When they all collect together in a classroom however, it is sometimes hard to distinguish those differences. The child's uniqueness is lost in what becomes the "mound of snow". When working with students in the classroom, if we view the learning and achievement diversity of every child as a challenging adventure, we help shape their futures through recognition of their uniqueness (the way we viewed our own learning). We can steer each child toward an understanding that they have interests that may or may not be those of the teacher; that they know about things that others in their class may or may not have knowledge of, and that they do have talents, aptitudes and aspirations to be shared with teachers and classmates. School becomes an exciting place to be when the teacher uses his/her own model of learning to instruct others.

## Adaptability

In education, change is inevitable. At some time in just about every educators' career, they are given a task or asked to make changes that they dislike, can't see the rational for or don't feel are necessary (moving to a different level or another building, changes in the curriculum, standards, assessment, length of the school day). It seems natural to want to be given the opportunity to "have a say" about things that effect us. Each day, however, when students enter classrooms, they do so without much say about how things will go for them. They are told that they have to be there for a set period of time, what subjects they should take, where they will sit, who will be their instructor, what time they will eat lunch and where, and the length of their school day.

Without many choices, we get a predictable resistance (opposition) from the students to what we are offering. No one really likes to be told what to do. Educators are very dedicated to their field of study, and it is natural to want those we teach to feel the same or similar commitment and enthusiasm for what we are offering them as we ourselves feel. It can be difficult to understand and hard to accept then, when students are resistant and sometimes even hostile to the content and approach we provide. If we can think of it for a moment in terms of our own feelings and reactions to change, we can begin to recognize that, for as many teachers that are open and excited about new ideas and direction, there are others who are not. If we, as the teaching models, can find ways to candidly embrace all the reorganizing, altering and revisiting that occurs in our field, and then constructively share our own feelings and ideas about those changes, we model for our students that the glass is half full rather than half empty. Through our modeling, we set the stage for our students that life comes with many choices. We demonstrate to our students that we have a choice to be flexible and willing to consider new material and approaches rather than the alternative of being miserable

and endlessly finding fault. We can accept what is expected of us, make the best of it but at the same time not lose sight of the fact that it is our own versatility, creative thinking and originality that finds the bright spot.

### **Accurate Self-Assessment of Personal Abilities and Needs**

Recognizing our own strengths and weaknesses in front of the students is another model of practice that we can offer students in the classroom. For example, if our music teacher (mentioned above) was trained on the violin, he/she might share with students that he/she is skilled at playing the violin, but less accomplished at playing the bass. Being less proficient in one area does not negate his/her knowledge of counting, intonation or technical expertise in music as a whole. Looking at it from this perspective and making it a personal example given by the teacher, demonstrates for the student how they can promote what they are good at while being open to what someone can offer them.

### **Appropriate Feedback**

Gaining insights that lead us toward “master teaching” often comes to us under the headings of formal evaluations and information observations by supervisors and colleagues. If the visit is formal, the teacher might prepare for the visit by scheduling advance time with their supervisor to discuss the lesson content and what they would like the observer to be watching for and reacting to on the evaluation. The outcome of the evaluation should be to determine what the teacher does well and areas where that teacher could grow and improve. If the supervisor, while going over the final evaluation with the teacher, starts off with “I think you did some really good things during your lesson. I could see that the students were really engaged in the learning. Would you be interested in some ideas that came to my mind as I watched you teach?” we start to

feel confident and open to what the supervisor is saying. If the supervisor started the conversation from a negative direction such as, “You really had no control over where your group was headed today. I hope that isn’t the way all your lessons go. Here is a list of changes I want to see in place starting today,” it would be easy for us to feel incompetent about our skills and closed to suggestions. It is primitive instinct to become defensive (fighter instinct) or withdrawn (flighter instinct) when someone starts to blame, accuse or threaten us. When students enter our classrooms and are encouraged through productive feedback (“Number 1 and number 4 are correctly done, but let’s take a look at number 2 and 5” or “You have some really creative ideas in your story, now let’s go back and see if we can work on the sequencing of the events”) rather than harsh criticism (“Numbers 2 and 5 are wrong. If you took your time, you wouldn’t make careless mistakes” or “I can’t make any sense out of this story the way it is written, you will have to start again”), it can lead toward the more productive model. We move the child away from recording “negative play” self-talk (I can’t do anything right; I never get good grades; I’ll probably fail) toward “positive play” self-talk (I can do things well, I do have abilities; I have something to offer in this classroom; I can learn and be successful). This positive self-talk, which can be openly modeled by the teacher (I really did a nice job organizing those books on my desk or I am proud of myself for getting all your papers back to you on the day that I promised), opens a pathway where each child can grow in confidence and self-worth, energized to do better and excited about what they can add to their own learning and the learning of others. If the teacher presents him/herself as a lifelong scholar, then the student is more open to a similar journey (I may not know it today but I can work at it, improve and even master it). The teacher and the student are now

partners on the same voyage, drawing from different experiences and different levels of expertise.

By determining what learning experiences we really want our students to “take in” while accomplishing their educational goals and attaching relevancy of knowledge to their day to day lives, we can reflect strongly on the value of that learning through our own modeling. When we establish the precept of positive modeling as an important part of our instructional goals, we remain (or become) that certain “favorite” teacher my graduate students recalled. We make a positive and lasting imprint on our students with the proof, through example that the “golden rule” (walking the talk) does exist in our classrooms as we continue (or begin) to practice what we teach.