

PREPARING THE INVISIBLE ENVIRONMENT: COMMUNICATION BETWEEN ADULTS

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Have you ever been around a couple where you could just feel the tension? They didn't argue in front of you, or say anything negative about the other, but you could just cut the tension with a knife? It's uncomfortable, especially as you decide how to behave, what to say, or whether or not you just pick up and run. You're just not sure what might be coming. Imagine now, that you're a child, and your emotional radar is much stronger and sensitive than that of an adult. You are in a classroom where the adults are behaving differently, and responding to children differently. How might you feel? What decisions might you be making about how to behave to get what you need?

The social-emotional environment is the invisible environment. The invisible environment consists of the structure of the classroom (routines, expectations and procedures – see last month's newsletter), the interpersonal relationships between the students and adults, and the approach to classroom discipline that the adults are using.

The most difficult year I ever had in the classroom was one where the invisible environment began to fall apart. The root of the problem was inconsistency between the adults in the classroom. In short, my co-teacher and I were not reading from the same sheet of music.

I had been teaching for six years, and was feeling very confident about my abilities in the classroom. I had developed the curriculum and environment in a way that really seemed to work for the students and for me. I had recently been promoted to the position of director of our school's middle school program, and was really excited for the new school year.

Over the summer, I hired a new co-teacher fresh out of graduate school to teach our humanities curriculum. He was very qualified, and we seemed, at first to really see things through the same lens. We had a lot in common, and really liked each other, personally. During our set-up week, prior to student arrival, I reviewed the basic structures of the classroom, and the ground rules, with him. However, it was a general overview, and I did not take the time to go over specific procedures with him, or set up a plan for ongoing communication.

After a few weeks of school, it became apparent that this new teacher was much more permissive than I was. He interpreted the classroom procedures and ground rules as a loose set of guidelines that could be adjusted by the adults as they saw fit. His approach was to make friends with the kids, and often did not follow through with the classroom ground rules, or set limits. As a result, I began to feel the need to over-compensate, and started to become more rigid and authoritarian. It quickly became a very difficult position. He became the good cop, and I the bad cop. I found it difficult to maintain friendly relationships because I felt that I couldn't let down my guard, and had to be the one to set and maintain limits.

My co-teacher thought I was too rigid, and I thought he was too passive. It was absolutely exhausting, and created a lot of resentment and stress between the two of us. Furthermore, we had no established way of resolving this conflict. So, I avoided the conflict, which wasn't a great idea. As you can imagine, the students picked up on the division and inconsistency between us. It wasn't long before they were

manipulating, playing one of us against the other, and the dream year that I thought I was going to have quickly turned into a disaster - rife with social difficulties, constant limit pushing and much more misbehavior than I was used to. I don't blame the kids. They were responding to the environment. They always do. That year, the invisible environment was inconsistent and unsafe. The students simply responded to the inconsistency.

Mistakes are an opportunity to learn! At the end of that school year, it was clear to me what had happened. I was able to see my role in creating an environment where clear and ongoing communication was not taking place between me and my teaching partner.

Communication – The Key to Consistency

In some instances, an inconsistent teaching team (assistant or co-teacher) may just be the result of a bad fit, resulting from different paradigms of the children and the classroom. Adults who just see things differently, and therefore behave differently. This can be remedied by a more careful hiring or classroom placement process. However, many instances of inconsistency between adults are driven by lack of clear *communication* in the following areas of the structure of the classroom:

- Roles and responsibilities. Who is doing what, specifically, and how are decisions made?
- Specific Classroom REPs (Routines, Expectations and Procedures). In last month's newsletter, I reviewed how to set up classroom REP's (Routines, Expectations and Procedures). You can access that newsletter here: <http://files.ctctcdn.com/110c5604301/fbce3f46-1d2a-45c9-8089-15b7c4ee7c84.pdf>
- Discipline philosophy and implementation. The routines, expectations and procedures provide the structure for our community, but the approach to discipline and interpersonal interactions will be what makes our house a home. Positive Discipline books, by Jane Nelsen and others, spell out, specifically how the adults interact with children to create a respectful, cooperative and harmonious social-emotional environment. Jane and I are currently working on a book, Positive Discipline in the Montessori Classroom, which we hope to have out next year.

What would it look like, if all the adults in a classroom were clear on their roles and responsibilities, developed the classroom routines, expectations and procedures together with the children, and practiced the same consistent approach to classroom discipline? The answer is obvious. But how do we get there?

Communication Game Plan for Head Teachers

Because we are working shoulder to shoulder with our teaching partner, we become very familiar with one another. Many times we become friends, as we work long hours together and provide each other with emotional support. While this is a wonderful benefit of working closely with someone, it's very easy to let our roles in the classroom become muddled, and when that happens the children suffer. Difficult issues go unaddressed, and then begin to pile up and become even more uncomfortable to discuss, and before you know it resentment builds, and the relationship begins to deteriorate.

While there is no “right answer” to how to facilitate communication between adults, I have outlined some suggestions that will help to achieve a higher level of communication and consistency, and maintain the roles and responsibilities that are our first priority in the classroom. While these plans might seem a little formal, it’s important to remember that formality is usually just what is missing in communication difficulties.

Before the School Year Begins

1. Develop a clear, specific, and written job descriptions that outline the roles and responsibilities of both adults in the classroom.
2. Review the written job description to identify what responsibilities carry the highest priority for each role. Being on the same page with what responsibilities are of the highest priority can save a lot of anxiety between teaching partners.
3. Develop clear, specific, and written routines, expectations and procedures in the classroom. While it is highly recommended that elementary and adolescent students participate in the creation of expectations and ground rules, there will still be basic adult expectations that should be clear and identified, and values that drive the ground rules and expectations that the children will create.
4. If your school operates within a traditional school year, with summers off, consider setting up your classroom for the new school year over the summer, or at the end of the current school year. Thus, freeing up time during set-up weeks, prior to the beginning of the school year, to establish strong communication between the adults.
5. Identify key Positive Discipline tools that you would like to focus on throughout the school year.

Beginning of the School Year

1. Review written job descriptions that outline the roles and responsibilities of the adults in the classroom. Take time to check in for clarity, especially on tasks that might be uncomfortable to delegate, but are still important (cleaning, changing of soiled clothes, parent communication, etc.). Remember, it is always easier to talk about things up front than it is when habits have been established.
2. Review priorities together. What responsibilities take precedence over others? When are routines broken, and for what reason?
3. Review routines, expectations and procedures. Take time to make changes and edit the document together, if needed. Pay specific attention to what each person’s specific responsibilities are in each routine and procedure. Discuss likely problems that may occur during transitions, and what can be done to prevent those problems, and what to do if they occur.
4. Identify a weekly time of 30 to 45 minutes that is set aside solely for communication. Be sure to choose a time that is likely to not require rescheduling. Block out that time in your calendars, with the intention of making this time for communication one of your highest priority. The expectation being, that other things are planned around this important time (parent meetings, after-school plans or activities, etc.). Also, consider setting aside 2 or more longer stretches of

time for longer meetings where the adults evaluate the REPs plan and Positive Discipline implementation.

5. If your school employs specialists, be sure to go through steps 1-3 with them, and schedule a regular meeting with them for ongoing communication.
6. Create an agenda, together for your weekly meeting that includes the following:
 - a. Ongoing feedback on roles and responsibilities
 - b. Review of REP's (Routines, Expectations and Procedures)
 - c. Classroom discipline issues and adult responses
 - d. Review of Positive Discipline tools
7. Identify Key Positive Discipline tools, and practice those tools together.
8. Schedule Teacher's Helping Teacher's Problem Solving meetings, at least once per month (See Positive Discipline in the Classroom, by Jane Nelsen and Lynn Lott).

During the School Year

1. Meet weekly, and protect your communication time with your teaching partner.
2. Stick to your agreed upon agenda. Acknowledge that it will be difficult to stay on the agenda because you both have so many common, daily experiences that can fill up the communication time (funny stories about children, frustrations with parents, etc.).
3. Challenge yourself to bring up difficult or uncomfortable topics that pertain to your agenda, promptly. Remember, it is uncomfortable for everyone when we bring up a difficult topics regarding someone else's behavior, if they have been happening for an extended period of time. The person receiving the message might be embarrassed, and will often ask, "How long have you felt this way?" or "Why didn't you tell me this when it first started happening?"
4. Choose one Positive Discipline tool to review each meeting.
5. Make changes to REPs intentionally, and as needed.
6. Ask for help. Be sure to use the Teacher's Helping Teacher's meeting, and remember, that it only takes two people to go through the process together. If you need help before the next THTPSS meeting, ask your teaching partner or another colleague.

Communication with Specialists and Substitutes

At every Positive Discipline workshop that I present, the question comes up from specialists, "What about specialists? We only have the children for short periods of time, and we see a lot of behavior problems. What do we do? What about us?" While an entire chapter could be devoted to specialists (whether or not to use them, and how best to use them, etc.) the topic, in its entirety is outside the scope of this book. However, I can pass on some mistakes that I have made with specialist (the schools I have worked at used specialists with our older children, where the teachers do not have the expertise – music, art, foreign language). By far the biggest mistake that we have made is not including specialists and substitute teachers in the communication plan and training schedule (roles and responsibilities, REPs, and Positive Discipline training). Because specialists and substitutes are usually only on campus for short periods of time, or in their own classrooms with different classes visiting them for short periods of time, they get left out of the organic ongoing communication and training. Put quite simply, we

forget about them because they are not part of our self-contained classroom communities, or part of our day to day staff communities. Yet, they are often responsible for the children for significant stretches of time, and some of the most serious issues of misbehavior happen when specialists and substitutes are at the helm.

It has been my experience, that the more we include specialists and substitute teachers in the communication plans and training schedules, the more effective they become, and the more valued and supported they feel.

Have a Wonderful Summer!

Starting in the fall, the focus of this newsletter will be on specific Positive Discipline tools, and how to address specific behavioral challenges in the classroom. I hope you all have a wonderful summer, and are able to recharge, rest and reinvigorate!

Until next time...