

## **Teacher Follow Through and Classroom Harmony**

By Jane Nelsen and Chip DeLorenzo

### **Is this your classroom?**

It's January, the most productive of the school year. You lose track of time because the children are normalized. They are working diligently, while you are giving non-stop lessons all morning; there is a gentle lullaby of productive activity resonating through the room like a morning mist; the children clean up their work every time they use a material; there is not a crumb on the floor in the snack area; children work out their conflict seamlessly in the peace area with little to no supervision; no one walks on a mat; chairs are pushed in every time; and, you could leave the room for a cup of coffee and come back 15 minutes later and the children wouldn't have missed you.

If not, you're not alone! Classroom management takes years of practice, and even the most experienced teachers have difficult moments or school-years! Like the children, we are lifelong learners who continue to learn through our own experience and discovery.

### **The Importance of Follow-Through**

During my first year teaching, I, like many first year teachers, found that the most difficult task in creating a peaceful classroom environment was not in the lesson giving or preparation of the classroom, but in managing "misbehavior" of the children. My lessons were being interrupted; children were disrupting the morning work-cycle; they were disrespectful to one another and to me; and *didn't follow the ground-rules!*

Meanwhile, my mentor, a veteran teacher of over 20 years, would enter the room and all the problems that I had just encountered seemed to vanish. It was discouraging! She seemed to handle the behavioral difficulties with such lack of effort that I wondered if I just didn't have what it took to be an effective Montessori teacher.

I'm happy to say that my mentor was not only effective with the children; she was effective with inexperienced teachers. She was experienced with *Positive Discipline*, and was able to pass on effective and concrete tools that I could put into practical application. One of the greatest lessons she passed onto me was the importance of follow-through with children.

My first lesson in the importance of follow-through came during one particularly frustrating day on the playground. I approached my mentor, Margaret, and asked for her guidance. I told her I was feeling guilty because I felt I was too harsh in my handling of a situation, as I had just metered out a "consequence" to my elementary class for demonstrating unsportsmanlike conduct. I told them that they would have to run laps at PE for the rest of the week to get their exercise.

When I spoke to Margaret, her response surprised me. I was certain that she would be supportive of my plan to apologize and to address the problem in a more positive manner. However, she knew me well and my weaknesses as a new teacher. What she asked me to do was to follow through with my “consequence”. She agreed that I was being punitive, but felt that it was more important, for the safety and security of the children, that they knew that I would follow through with what I said I would do. She added something like, “They’ll be fine. I’m sure you won’t run them too hard.”

I didn’t, but it was still a long week.

The children’s response was actually quite profound. After this experience and learning to practice follow-through (outlined below) at Margaret’s suggestion, the children in my class began to become more cooperative and respectful. They began to show more cooperation, not only with me but with each other. They seemed much more secure in the classroom. I also became more confident, especially after seeing that I was capable of implementing respectful classroom management tools that actually worked.

### **Steps for Follow-Through**

Now, when I teach *Positive Discipline* workshops, there are usually a few specific tools that I recommend that teachers post on the back of their closet door for quick reference. The “Steps for Follow Through” is one of those tools. Here’s how it works:

1. Find a time when you and the child can give the matter your full attention.
2. Have a friendly discussion held to gather and share information about what is going on for both the teacher and the student regarding the problem.
3. Make a decision (with the student if appropriate) about what you will do in the future.
4. When the issue arises again, the teacher simply follows through with a brief statement of fact, such as, “We had an agreement,” or “It’s time to go inside.”

### **Four Suggestions for Effective Follow Through**

1. Agreed upon solutions or consequences should be logical, respectful and helpful long-term.
2. When appropriate, be specific about deadlines and consequences.
3. Keep comments very concise. (“I notice you didn’t \_\_\_\_\_. Would you please do that now.”)
4. In response to objections ask, “What was our agreement?”
5. In response to further objections, be quiet and use nonverbal communication to follow through: point to the item that needs to be picked up; smile knowingly; take the child kindly by the hand and lead them to/away from the issue.
6. When the student concedes to the agreement, express appreciation. “Thank you for keeping our agreement.”

## **Actions Speak Much Louder than Words**

Many teachers find the children in their classroom not following the ground rules mid-year. In response they begin reminding the children of the ground rules and re-giving lessons that they gave at the beginning of the year. Teachers who attend our workshops will often comment that they feel as though their nagging when they keep reminding children of the ground rules. While reminders may be appropriate for a short time after a long school break, it may not be the long-term answer to the problem.

Follow-through is simply means acting upon what you said, without using lectures, constant reminders (nagging) or punishment. By using this tool, in a kind and firm manner, teachers find it possible to meet the needs of the situation while maintaining dignity and respect for all concerned, and for the situation.

Acting rather than talking helps students understand that for every opportunity or freedom that they have, there is a related responsibility. For example, a student has the opportunity to work with her choice of materials. She also has the responsibility to use those materials respectfully. If that child's behavior is disrespectful then they lose the opportunity to use those materials. This formula is effective if the consequence is enforced with kind and firm follow-through; and the child can regain the opportunity when they show they are ready for the responsibility.