

Deconstructing Discipline

By Sarah Rosenthal | Categories: SEL, Caring School Community, Thought Leadership

Dirty Word vs. Antidote to Apathy

People often have a negative reaction to the word *discipline*. They point out that various institutions have often been guilty of employing “disciplinary measures” not to reform, educate, or nurture, but rather to control minds and hearts. Many see even milder versions of this approach—the saying “Children should only speak when spoken to,” for example—as problematic because they are undemocratic. Some go further, arguing that such measures exist on the same continuum as the worst abuses of power.



Others associate the word *discipline* with *control*, but point to the upside: whether in making a moral decision or completing a project, we humans tend to take the easy way out, and we need tough regimens and rules to do the right thing, play fair, better ourselves, and persevere. According to this view, from the playground to the battleground, strict codes are necessary. Reprimands or even punishments for underperformance may hurt when meted out, but ultimately build character.

Other Flavors

For all their differences, both groups focus on the same denotation of the word *discipline*, which per Merriam-Webster can mean “control gained by enforcing obedience and order” and “punishment.” But the word comes in other flavors too. For a university professor, the one that might pop to mind is “field of study:” linguistics, statistics, mathematics (or, if you prefer the suffix *-ry*, consider chemistry, forestry, animal husbandry).

Discipline can also mean “regular practice,” the way we think of artists or writers having a discipline. This notion is related to the idea of control, except we think of it as self-generated, not imposed from the outside. We admire these people with their lofty goals and diligent habits—the pianist pounding away at the keyboard, the novelist rising before dawn to wrangle words onto the page or screen while beloveds snore.

The Wor(l)d According to Mr. Rogers

But how did these awe-inspiring individuals develop their noble, self-directed disciplines? Were they born that way?

No. They were not.

Besides the element of tons of practice, made familiar to us by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*, most people devoted to a

discipline had something else—caring, wise guidance, maybe from a mom or dad, a neighbor, or a coach. Or a teacher.



That guidance, it turns out, is at the very heart of the word *discipline*. Fred (aka Mister) Rogers points out in *Wisdom from the World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember* that *discipline* comes from *disciple*. The latter instantly evokes the image of a deeply caring, committed relationship between teacher and learners.

As Rogers puts it, “Discipline is a teaching-learning kind of relationship as the similarity of the word *disciple* suggests. By helping our children learn to be self-disciplined, we are also helping them learn how to become

independent of us as, sooner or later, they must. And we are helping them learn how to be loving parents to children of their own.”*

We all want to build and participate in caring school communities, and Rogers’ definition of *discipline* serves as a beacon pointing the way. Focusing on his words helps us create the conditions needed to help students develop the self-discipline they need in school and beyond. We can picture the warm, safe, well-managed classroom in which the teaching-learning relationship he describes can take place. It’s a classroom where every student feels heard and included. It’s a classroom where students of all backgrounds can thrive as thoughtful, caring, responsible people. It’s a classroom where those students who need more support can count on getting one-on-one interventions tailored to their needs without feeling ostracized.

That’s the kind of classroom that helps kids become compassionate, self-disciplined individuals: people who know how to calm themselves down when riled, cheer up someone who’s sad, befriend others who are different from them, respectfully say what they think, get stuff done on time; who might blow the whistle on wrongdoing, give their all to a tough agility drill, or show up daily at the page or stage or screen or keyboard or canvas, come hell or high water.

Aren’t those the people we want more of in our world?

Learn more about Collaborative Classroom’s approach to discipline, which assumes that all students want to and can behave well at school, and that children are capable of learning and changing their behavior. Download a preview of the newly revised Caring School Community program here.

*Rogers, Fred. *Wisdom from the World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember*(White Plains: Peter Pauper Press, Inc., 2003).