

Discipline

We Repeat, Let the Buyer Beware: A Response to Canter

An effective discipline plan must emphasize respect and responsibility while addressing behavioral problems. Assertive Discipline essentially tells students, "Behave or else!"

In "Packaged Discipline Programs: Let the Buyer Beware" (October 1988), we contrasted discipline programs that emphasize obedience to authority with those that primarily aim to teach responsibility. We did not offer a critique specific to Assertive Discipline, nor did we approach contrasting models on the basis of research. We simply pointed out the potential dangers of implementing a power-based obedience model, no matter what it is called.

In his response in that same issue, Lee Canter claimed that Assertive Discipline is both practical and effective. He cited research that is essentially a collection of doctoral dissertation studies that to our knowledge have not been replicated. These claims do not square with the independent syntheses of the research pertaining to Assertive Discipline offered by Render, Paddilla, and Krank (p. 72).

We see Assertive Discipline as little more than an attractive, well-marketed behavior modification program in which one person (teacher or administrator) has all the power to define the rules while offering group and individual rewards for compliance and administering punishments through public disclosure. There is no systematic means by which students are allowed any input into the process. Nowhere are they viewed as capable

critical thinkers or decision makers. Further, Assertive Discipline does not address the known relationships between discipline and teaching, discipline and motivation, or discipline and stress.

Canter does not respond to any of these issues in his rebuttal. His program implicitly sees students as the cause of all problems, so there are no demands on anybody else in the system to change. That premise may in large part account for the vociferous support he initially gets from some educators. It is certainly far more appealing to see conflict as caused by "those unappreciative, unmotivated kids" than by teaching style, curriculum emphases, goals of the school, or stubborn home-based problems that spill over into school. Any system that gives all of the power to those in charge, along with the premise that

those who are not will submit (even if the leaders are benevolent), is doomed to eventual failure. Realistically, the only choice Assertive Discipline offers is, "Behave or else!"

That Canter's program has hit a responsive chord among large numbers of educators is unmistakable. Teachers feel understandably frustrated by unmotivated, listless, and disruptive students who are turned off to school and who intrude upon others' rights to safety, security, and mental stimulation. Assertive Discipline provides an attractive, packaged, simple-to-understand, easy-to-implement alternative, which offers initial hope but often leads to disappointment. Except in extreme cases, a truly effective discipline plan must include, but go beyond, rules, rewards, consequences, and punishments. It must send a message of respect, dignity, belief, and hope to those most directly affected.

Once again, when it comes to packaged discipline programs, we say: let the buyer beware! □

We see Assertive Discipline as little more than an attractive, well-marketed behavior program.

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