

The Role of Emotion Co-Regulation in Discipline

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Classroom Management

Helping students regain their calm after misbehavior doesn't mean there are no consequences—it ensures that the right lesson is learned.

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Our schools are currently seeing a dramatic increase in students of all ages carrying in anxiety, adversity, and trauma from a variety of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Social and emotional learning programs are critical for addressing these emotional and mental challenges, but we must also rethink our discipline procedures and policies. We need to understand that traditional discipline works best with the children who need it the least, and works least with the children who need it the most. Discipline ideally is not something we do to students—it should be a quality we want to develop within them.

For students with ACEs, traditional punishments can unintentionally retraumatize and reactivate their stress response systems. Recent research in school discipline is grounded in the neuroscience of attachment, which emphasizes the significance of relationships. Those relationships begin with an adult in a regulated, calm brain state. It takes a calm brain to calm another brain—this co-regulation is something that students with ACEs may have missed out on. Their school can be an environment where they feel safe and connected even when they make poor choices.

This doesn't mean giving students a pass for misbehavior: There are still consequences for poor choices, but regulating the feelings and sensations a student is experiencing is the initial step, one that is critical for a sustainable change in behavior.

Emotions are contagious, and when a teacher is able to model a calm presence through their tone, facial expression, and posture, students are less likely to react defensively. When the teacher listens to what is beneath the behavior, focusing on the student's feelings, this type of validation says to the child that the teacher sees them and is trying to understand. When the teacher takes deep breaths, gets a drink of water, and creates space for reflection for a minute or two, they are modeling the regulation skills they want to see from students.

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If I'm the teacher, co-regulation—the process of helping a student who has made a poor choice of behavior to regain their composure—begins with the awareness of my own sensations and feelings when I am disciplining the student. It entails a willingness to regulate my own brain before I act on that discipline. Personally, I try to commit to three quick routines that feel doable to calm me in a short period of time: taking three deep breaths, texting a friend or pulling an affirmation from a prepared jar, and stretching and moving for a minute.

It's much better to wait for a few minutes when we're feeling irritated and angry before we discipline, and this is also excellent modeling for students. Students read our nonverbal communication, so paying attention to our facial expression and posture in addition to our tone of voice is critical when teaching the behaviors we want to see.

Focusing on the student's sensations and the feelings that lie beneath the behavior help us to understand the root causes and patterns of a behavior we might discover when there is rising irritation and anger. I may have a minute or two to redirect—by suggesting that the student go and get a drink of water or take a couple of deep breaths to calm down with me before we talk about the problem.

Creating a friend-in-need system could be helpful so each student has a buddy or even another adult in the building to go to when they begin to feel agitated. For the friend-in-need system, teachers ask students to select one or two peers or adults at the school who they trust and feel comfortable with if they need to take a break and be in another environment or talk through those challenging moments. This is preventative discipline and a way for students to have options when they begin to feel negative. These calming strategies are taught ahead of time and become a part of our procedures and classroom agreements or guidelines.

Validation is a powerful way to calm an agitated and angry student. It's calming to be understood and felt by another. Some things you can say to help a student feel validated:

- "That must feel awful."
- "You seem really angry."
- "You seem really frustrated."
- "What a difficult situation you're in."

Validation opens the door for teacher and student to discuss choices and consequences and to create a plan of action for the next time there's a conflict.

I once heard that it is critical that a teacher's brain should resemble a thermostat rather than a thermometer when it comes to disciplining a student. What does this mean? Like a thermostat, the teacher needs to maintain a steady temperature throughout a moment of conflict, with a goal of creating conversation and a plan of action with a student who understands their choices and the consequences of those actions. The teacher needs to model the behaviors they want to see and to model self-care and respect during the discipline process.