



Set Them Free: Teaching skills of independence By Marilyn Winter

Mrs. Anderson is at her "wits end." Although she has told her first grade students numerous times to come into the room quietly, they continue to enter in a loud disruptive manner. She is about to "chalk" them off as just a "bad bunch" of kids.

Gary's mom tells him to pick up his room and make his bed, but each day Gary is out the door without his jobs completed. Gary's mom wonders what she can do to make Gary a better boy. These scenarios are not unusual dilemmas within the walls of many school and homes.

I believe that, innately, children want to be "good," to do the "right thing," and to act in ways that are acceptable in the society to which they belong. "Why then," one might ask, "do children often act in ways that cause us to question their good intentions?"

Could it be that some youngsters do not know what "being good" looks like and have little opportunity to learn and practice doing the "right thing?" Could it be that the adults in their society neglect to teach skills of proper behavior and independence that will enable them to be free from constant adult hovering and guidance? Do we, with good intentions of raising responsible, productive children, fall into patterns of telling and controlling rather than teaching, modeling, and practicing and setting free?

In the school setting, teaching skills of independence may be one of the most important things we do with children. If that is true, can we afford to take less care in teaching these skills than we do in teaching math, reading, or music? When we want our students to learn to add, do we "tell" them only once how to add and then expect them to comprehend and perform? Usually, we take great pains to teach the skills of addition. We write lesson plans, model, practice, and evaluate mastery of these skills. Then, we re-teach, practice, and polish them again and again, diligently focusing on the process, sometime for years. Can we then expect children to learn the skills of proper behavior in one "telling" of the rules?

To help children establish productive skills of behavior, we, the adults, must be proactive rather than reactive. We must think ahead with respect to the behavioral skills our students will need to be independent and successful in their school setting. Then we can incorporate the teaching of these skills into daily lessons. These skills need to be built and rebuilt:

1. during the first weeks of school.
2. after a break in the school schedule
3. when new types of activities are being introduced (field trips, movement activities, working in groups, etc.)

After we have taught the skill of independence, we can then set our students free to try their wings. They may fall short of expectations, but we can always begin again, re-teach, and practice. Whatever the results, we must give them the opportunity to learn to fly on their own.

Let's think for a moment of the school setting and the behaviors we want our students to display. We want them to pay attention, do their work, think for themselves, and to act independently and responsibly. We want them to show regard for their peers, the adults in the school, and the physical plant. We want them to recognize the rights of others to:

1. learn, free from distractions
2. have a certain amount of uninvaded space about them
3. feel safe physically and emotionally

Following are ideas and lesson plans that helped us make skills of independence work in the music room at Whittier Elementary.

To Realize Skills of Independence

Students must understand:

1. What is expected
2. The need and reason for these expectations. They must want to learn the skill and believe they, personally will be better off if they learn the skill.
3. What the desired behavior looks like. They need to see a model and to participate in the modeling process. Remember that humor and a lighthearted attitude can go a long way. For example, modeling behavior opposite from that desired can be fun and often can clearly bring a point home.

Students need to:

1. Practice enough to internalize the skill.
2. Receive encouragement and feedback as to how they are doing.
3. Discuss, describe, and reflect upon what they did.

Be held responsible for their behavior. If a student fails to meet the criteria, he or she needs to go through the process again. If a large number of students fail to meet the criteria, the teacher may choose to re-teach the skill to the whole class. One rule should preside over these procedures: to hold a child responsible for an action, ask yourself, "Do I have proof that this student has been taught and has learned the skill for which he or she is being held responsible?"

Transitions

A most important time for students to act independently and responsibly is during transitional times; changing from one setting or activity to another. To accomplish the task of getting students into the music room and started on their work, I have used the following routine. Each morning instructions were written on the board for the whole day. As students entered the music room, they read instructions for their grade and began work. This freed me to take roll, check lesson plans, organize materials, or to visit with students. These assignments were always something the students knew well. Before asking the students to operate independently, procedures were taught, modeled, and practiced. The assignment board often read like this:

Good Morning

Second Grades - Sit with your partner and quiz the line number of the hand staff

Third Grades - Gather mapping supplies and make four maps for the song, "Swing a Lady."

Fourth Grades - Pick up your recorder and without blowing, practice the fingerings for "Hot Cross Buns."

Fifth Grades - Begin playing the game, "Hop Up, My Ladies."
Song Starter, Ann.

First person go be "it," Andy.

