

Self-Control

Character... It starts with me!

*LOOKING AT INITIATIVE
THROUGH THE EYES OF TRAUMA*

Vs. Self-Indulgent

DECEMBER 2013

I WILL:

- not act impulsively
- not equate desires with rights
- set my own limits
- see my anger as a sign that something is wrong in me
- walk away from things that are not right

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Rejecting wrong desires and doing what is right.

By Jodi Landers

I'd like to begin this month by saying that so much of teaching self-control to students who suffer trauma is understanding *why* certain behaviors occur. Knowing the *why* can lead you to the *how* of better behaviors.

You're familiar with the youngster who does not stay seated in the classroom, cease from tapping his pencil, or keep his hands to himself. You may tell your principal or the child's parents, "He will not follow directions no matter what I ask him to do." You are not incorrect in your assessment of the situation, except in maybe one area, the words "*will not*". Sometimes students disregard directions deliberately because testing limits is what helps them learn boundaries. But in cases of children who suffer trauma, the fact is, they *cannot* follow most directions. Children don't want to do poorly. They are just often caught up in a cycle of learned behaviors and are a product of their environment and trauma. Last month, I talked about the primary function of the brain being survival. For children and teenagers who suffer trauma, your directions may be virtually meaningless. How can staying in my seat, or not being a bully help me survive? These students have different priorities and beliefs than you do. They view the world in a different way. Rejecting wrong desires and doing what is right will never happen if it, in some way, doesn't work for them. This in no way makes them selfish. It makes them survivors.

Rather than try to change their beliefs through consequences, let's try a more basic approach. The activities I am suggesting you try this month focus on communication. One is as simple as having students practice verbally requesting what they want, rather than just acting on their impulses and taking things. Another is communicating how they



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feel when they cannot act on that impulse. There are no wrong answers, but instead the opportunity to form you to establish more communicative relationships with these students. Often, all young people need is a person in their corner in order to gain the confidence to use this strategy in the future. Communication is not a strength for some students and there can be huge deficits with young people who suffer trauma. An alternative is to give students a choice of request cards that help them express what it is they want or need. They can read them aloud or have a peer read them, if they choose.

An alternative for older students may be to use blank post-it notes. This activity is used to begin to break the cycle of impulsive behaviors by allowing a moment of thought to occur before acting. Here is an example. A student becomes frustrated in class and needs to “get away”. She gets up and runs out of the classroom. It is disruptive to other students and as a teacher, you need to know where your students are at all times. A solution, this student can place a yellow post-it note on the corner of her desk and leave the room quietly. What does this accomplish? First of all, this “system” has been established ahead of time which means you are making an effort with the student to work on a resolution rather than just handing out detentions. Also, it allows for communication between the teacher and the student. The teacher now knows where the student is going. The stipulation is set, also ahead of time, that the student can utilize this “system” if she can leave the room quietly. Other guidelines would include how long she is allowed to be gone. You’d be amazed how rules look different coming from a person the child trusts.

I have heard teachers say, “Doesn’t this give the student too much control?” “Won’t she just take advantage and leave all the time?” The answer to the first question is, yes, it gives her control. Isn’t that what we want? Isn’t this article about self-control? You are still the teacher, the adult. You have the final say, always. And if a student is abusing the situation, then make a change. If we “front load” respect to kids, we often get it back. Young people need boundaries, not brick walls.

Remember, if you keep doing what you’ve been doing, you’ll keep getting what you’ve been getting.

Peace-
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