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Revisiting Social Responsibility

The Art of Caring Confrontation
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When students accept responsibility for holding one another to the highest standards, everyone wins.

One of the most overwhelming negative feelings a young person can have is that of being on the outside, not being accepted, loved, or respected by others. Such feelings can have a major effect on the way a young person views school, learning, and life. Eric Harris, one of the students who opened fire at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999 wrote in his suicide note to the community, "Your children who have ridiculed me, who have chosen not to accept me, who have treated me like I am not worth their time are dead." A classmate of Dylan Klebold, the other teen shooter, said, "Dylan really felt unloved. He wasn't so bad. He was lonely."

Incidentally, both Harris and Klebold were A students. The Columbine shooting was an extreme case of two teenagers' pain erupting into violence. We will never know how other aspects of Harris's and Klebold's relationships, families, and emotional makeup affected them or tipped the scales into tragedy. We will continue to debate how such tragedies can be averted and how much of a role school culture can realistically play, but we know that a school atmosphere that nurtures respectful relationships is something we want for all students.

In schools all across the world, young people tease, bully, and exclude one another daily. The consequences of these actions can go beyond a general feeling of unhappiness among the targeted kids, causing these students to engage in violence, drop out of school, or join gangs to feel respected. One way to create a more positive, inclusive culture is to hold all students responsible for becoming—and for helping peers become—the best people they can be.

I call this approach "collective responsibility." Imagine the positive change to our world if every parent, educator, student, and professional leader focused on helping his or her peers become the best individuals possible. Creating a critical mass of teachers and students who are discharging that responsibility could elevate the character of our families, schools, and corporations—indeed our entire society. I have seen this approach used successfully in many schools that were named National Schools of Character by the Character Education Partnership.

For adults and students to discharge that responsibility, they must learn and practice the art of caring confrontation. David Augsberger's 2009 book, Caring Enough to Confront presents the following guidelines for effective confrontation:

- **Confront caringly.** Confront only after showing real care for the other person, and confront only to express genuine concern.
- **Confront gently.** Speak tactfully, in a way you would like to be spoken to about a sensitive matter. For example, say, "I understand where you are coming from. I have been there, too. May I make a suggestion?" Do not offer more than the relationship can bear or draw out more than you have put into the relationship.
- **Confront constructively.** Make your positive intentions clear at the start to minimize the possibility that your comments may be interpreted as blaming, shaming, or punishing (negative aspects of most confrontation). For example, you might begin by saying, "John, you and I are good friends. What do you think about this idea?"
- **Confront with acceptance and trust.** Assume that the other person's intentions are good even if his or her actions are problematic. Acknowledge good intentions by saying, for example, "I know you want to be helpful, but ..."
- **Confront clearly.** Report what you actually observe, what emotions you feel or sense that others feel, and what you conclude would be a good next step for the person you're confronting. For example, "I heard what you said to Mary" (observation). "It seemed to hurt her feelings" (emotion). "I'm sure you didn't mean to hurt her. Please apologize to her" (conclusion).

Integrating Confrontation into School Life
School leaders and teachers can integrate caring confrontation into instruction, student work, and the broader school environment. Here are eight ways to foster collective responsibility at school:

1. **Work Peer Criticism into Writing Instruction**
   Confrontation includes helping peers understand the need to improve academic work. Teachers can coach students on providing one another this kind of critique in their writing. The teacher might show the class an excellent essay and guide a class discussion on what makes it excellent. The class should identify specific criteria for high-quality writing that all can aim for. Students then write individual essays with these criteria in mind, and each student takes a turn sharing his or her essay with the class and receiving constructive criticism from all classmates.

   Teachers can guide students in how to do such critiques and confront students who may be too "nice" or too sweeping in their criticism. Each student rewrites the essay—more than once if necessary—to incorporate this critical feedback until each writer produces a high-quality piece.

   Through this process, each student learns not only how to write an essay that is excellent in both mechanics and content but also how to persevere until he or she achieves excellence. Master teacher Ron Berger (2003), author of an outstanding book on essay writing practice, points out that often when young people realize they can achieve excellence by persevering, they are never again satisfied with mediocrity. Students also get practice in two important character traits: how to critique others in a caring but effective way and how to receive criticism with a positive attitude. And they enjoy the team-building experience of helping their peers become better writers.

2. **Pair Students as Buddies**
   Match students (of the same age or mixed ages) into buddy pairs with the clear expectation that both buddies will help each
other set goals for continuous improvement in academics or behavior—and continually nudge each other to approach those goals. For example, Hilltop Elementary School in Lynnwood, Washington (a 1999 National School of Character), found that pairing 3rd graders with 1st graders was effective in building friendships and respect among students with differences in ages and personalities. During the school year, buddies shared lunch, worked on projects, and participated in service learning activities together. These relationships gave older students a sense of responsibility and younger ones a sense of security.

3. **Arrange "Concern Meetings"**
   During a concern meeting, a counselor and two or more peers privately confront a student who has fallen down academically or behaviorally, expressing concern and probing for how that student might do better and what supports the student may need. The choice of peers in a concern meeting is crucial. If the erring student does not perceive all participants as caring friends, there is a good chance that this student will experience the peer pressure during the meeting as harmful rather than helpful. When the confronted student believes the confronters are on his or her side, however, that student can make remarkable changes.

   At Hyde Leadership Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. (a National School of Character finalist), several educators and four students held a concern meeting with an 11th grade girl whose grades had taken a downturn and who was speaking disrespectfully to teachers. The girl first blamed the teacher present for not being fair, but one of the boys said softly, "I think you're pointing the finger at other people. I've done that myself. The sooner you address this as your problem, the sooner you'll solve it." Another student told her, "I've been where you are. Last year I got myself into a similar predicament because of my attitude. But I've known you for a long time. I know your work ethic. I know you're much better than this." By the meeting's end, the girl's defensiveness was gone. There were some tears, and her four peers spontaneously hugged her. With the dean's encouragement, she made goals for her coursework and community service and set a time to check in with the group and report on how her plan was working.

4. **Use Class Meetings to Face Problems**
   A whole-class meeting can be used to confront negative behavior without naming individual offenders. For example, a teacher might say: "Let's give examples of bullying, but no names, please. How do you feel when these things are done to you?" You can also use a whole-class meeting to role-play situations in which students might confront one another in positive ways ("Please don't call me that—I don't like it"). The class might explore common misbehaviors and conflicts in a general way as part of a daily class gathering time (often called "morning meeting") or schedule meetings to tackle specific problems.

5. **Use Conflict Resolution**
   Students who conduct conflict resolution sessions with their peers should learn the art of confrontation as part of their conflict resolution training. A student mediating a peer conflict might start out by saying, "Both of you are my friends. I like and respect each of you and it hurts me to see you unhappy with each other. Please tell me what happened, and let's come up with some ways to avoid this happening again."

6. **Hold Teammates Accountable**
   Nonacademic groups are prime places to teach students to hold one another accountable for peak performance. Coaches should teach their teams a process for postgame debriefing in which they evaluate how well each player performed a particular skill (for example, passing to an open player). Ask each player to set an individual weekly goal and to identify a partner who will hold him or her accountable for achieving that goal. Similarly, expect members of the school's choir, band, or theatre group to confront peers who aren't doing their best ("It's not fair to our choir when you are late").

7. **Take It Home**
   School staff can arrange to train parents to use Augsberger's five guidelines in confronting their children, thereby reinforcing the training the students receive in school. All National Schools of Character insist that the parents of their students proactively work with the school to help young students acquire the virtues of honesty, responsibility, respect, hard work, and caring.

8. **Make Pushing for Improvement "Cool"**
   Create a schoolwide culture in which it is considered cool to help one's self and one's peers become the best that they can be. The Web site connected to Smart and Good Schools (an initiative that spotlights stellar character education in schools launched by the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs and the Institute for Excellence and Ethics) features many examples of how schools can create a culture of character. For example, the Hyde School in Bath, Maine, a 2001 National School of Character finalist, uses the concept of "being your brother's—or sister's—keeper" as one of its five guiding principles; this is actually how the school defines leadership.

**Challenging But Powerful**

Effective confrontation is taught most easily in situations in which every confronter is clearly trying to help a peer learn to improve an existing talent. Writing workshops, music programs, or sports teams are often good places to start. By contrast, an errant student who is being corrected for slacking off, lying, or cheating knows he or she is being criticized for misconduct and may get defensive or tune out. In such cases, the confronter must be a more skillful practitioner of the five guidelines described here. Collective responsibility is a challenging but powerful practice for building character and improving academic performance. To do it well, we must first learn and practice the art of caring confrontation. It's worth the effort. Students who learn this art and take responsibility for bringing out the best in others will reap great benefits, not only in school but also throughout their lives.

**References**


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