

Poverty Series—Part III

Working with Students from Poverty: Discipline

by Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D.



In poverty, discipline is often about penance and forgiveness. Because love is unconditional and because the time frame is the present, the notion that discipline should be instructive and change behavior is not a part of the culture in generational poverty. In matriarchal, generational poverty, the mother is the most powerful position and is in some ways “keeper of the soul,” so she dispenses the judgments, determines the amount and price of penance, and gives forgiveness. When forgiveness is granted, behaviors and activities return to the way they were before the incident.

It is important to note that the approach is to teach a separate set of behaviors. Many of the behaviors students bring to school help them survive outside of school. Students learn and use many different rules depending on the video game they are playing. Likewise, they need to learn to use different rules to be successful in the setting they are in. If poor students do not know how to fight physically, they are going to be in danger on the streets. But if that is their only method for resolving a problem, then they cannot be successful in school.

The culture of poverty does not provide for success in the middle class, because the middle class to a large extent requires the self-governance of behavior. To be successful in work and in school requires the self-governance of behavior. What then do schools need to do to teach appropriate behavior?

Structure and Choice

The two anchors of any effective discipline program that moves students to self-governance are structure and choice. The program must clearly outline the expected behaviors and the consequences of not choosing those behaviors. The program must also emphasize that the individual always has choice—to follow or not to follow the expected behaviors. With each choice then comes consequence—either desirable or not desirable. Many discipline workshops use this approach and are available to schools.

When the focus is, “I’ll tell you what to do and when,” the student can never move from dependence to independence. He or she is always at the level of dependence.

Behavior Analysis

Mentally or in writing, teachers or administrators must first examine the behavior analysis:

1. What behaviors does the child need to be successful?
2. Does the child have the resources to develop those behaviors?
3. Will it help to contact a parent? Are resources available through them? What resources are available through the school district?
4. How will behaviors be taught?
5. What are other choices the child could make?
6. What will help the child repeat the successful behavior?

When these questions are completed, they provide answers to the strategies that will most help the student. The chart on the next page indicates possible explanations of behaviors and possible interventions.

Participation of the Student

While the teacher or administrator is analyzing, the student must analyze as well. To help students do so, give them this four-part questionnaire.

This has been used with students as young as second semester, first grade. Students have the most difficulty with question number three. Basically, they see no other choices available than the one they have made.

Name:

1. What did you do?
2. Why did you do that?
3. List four other things you could have done.
4. What will you do next time?

In going over the sheet with the student, it is important to discuss other choices that could have been made. Students often do not have access to another way to deal with the situation. For example, if I slam my finger in the car door, I can cry, cuss, hit the car, be silent, kick the tire, laugh, stoically open the car door, groan, etc.

The Language of Negotiation

One of the bigger issues with students from poverty is that many of them are their own parents. They parent themselves and others—often younger siblings. In many instances, they are the parent to the adult in the household.

Inside everyone's head are internal voices that guide the individual.

These three voices are referred to as the child voice, the adult voice, and the parent voice. It has been my observation that individuals who have become their own parent quite young do not have an internal adult voice. They have a child voice and a parent voice, but not an adult voice.

What an internal adult voice does is allow for negotiation. This voice provides the language of negotiation and allows the issues to be examined in a non-threatening way.

Educators tend to speak to students in a parent voice, particularly in discipline situations. To the student who is already functioning as a parent, this is unbearable, and almost immediately, the incident is exacerbated beyond the original happening. The tendency is for educators to also use the parent voice with poor parents because the assumption is that a lack of resources must indicate a lack of intelligence. Poor parents are extremely offended by this as well.

When the parent voice is used with a student who is already a parent in many ways, the outcome is anger. The student is angry because anger is based on fear. What the parent voice forces the

Behavior Related to Poverty	Intervention
Laughs when disciplined. A way to save face in matriarchal poverty.	<i>Understand the reason for the behavior. Tell the student three or four other behaviors that would be more appropriate.</i>
Argues loudly with the teacher. Poverty is participatory, and the culture has a distrust of authority. Sees the system as inherently dishonest and unfair.	<i>Don't argue with the student. Have them complete the four-part questionnaire on page 2. Model respect for students.</i>
Angry response. Anger is based on fear. The question is what the fear is—loss of face?	<i>Respond in the adult voice. When the student cools down, discuss other responses that could be used.</i>
Inappropriate or vulgar comments. They rely on casual register, may not know formal register.	<i>Make students generate or teach students other phrases that could be used to say the same thing.</i>
Physically fights. Necessary to survive in poverty. Only knows the language of survival. Does not have language or belief system to use conflict resolution. Sees himself as less than a man if does not fight.	<i>Stress that fighting is unacceptable in school. Examine other options the student could live with at school. One option is not to settle the business at school.</i>
Hands always on someone else. Poverty has a heavy reliance on nonverbal data and touch.	<i>Allow them to draw or doodle. Have them hold their hands behind their backs when in line or standing. Give them as much to do with their hands as possible in a constructive way.</i>
Cannot follow directions. Little procedural memory used in poverty. Sequence not used or valued.	<i>Write steps on the board. Have them write at the top of the paper the steps needed to finish the task. Have them practice procedural self-talk.</i>
Extremely disorganized. Lack of planning, scheduling, or prioritizing skills. Not taught in poverty. Also, probably does not have a place to put things at home so they can be found.	<i>Teach a simple color-coded method of organization in the classroom. Use the five-finger method for memory at the end of the day. Make students give a plan for their own organization.</i>
Only completed part of a task. No procedural self talk. Does not “see” the whole task.	<i>Write on the board all the parts of the task. Make students check off each part when finished.</i>
Disrespectful to teacher. Has lack of respect for authority and the system. May not know any adults worthy of respect.	<i>Tell students that approach is not a choice. Identify for students the correct voice tone and word choice that is acceptable. Make them practice.</i>
Harms other students, verbally or physically. This may be a way of life. Probably a way to buy space or distance. May have become a habitual response. Poverty tends to address issues in the negative.	<i>Tell the students that approach is not a choice. Have the students generate other options. Give students alternative verbal phrases.</i>
Cheats or steals. Indicative of weak support system, weak role models/emotional resources. May indicate extreme financial need. May indicate no instruction/guidance during formative years.	<i>Use metaphor story to find the reason or need the cheating and stealing met. Address the reason or need. Stress that the behavior is illegal and not a choice at school.</i>
Constantly talks. Poverty is very participatory.	<i>Make students write all questions and responses on a note card two days a week. Tell students they get five comments a day. Build participatory activities into the lesson.</i>

student to do is either use the child voice or use the parent voice. If the student uses the parent voice, the student will get in trouble. If the student uses the child voice, he or she will feel helpless and therefore at the mercy of the adult.

Many students choose to use the parent voice in return because it is less frightening than the memories connected with being helpless.

Part of the reality of poverty is the language of survival. There are simply not enough resources to engage in a discussion of them. For example, if there are five hot dogs and five people, the distribution of the food is fairly clear. The condiments for the hot dogs are going to be limited so the discussion will be fairly limited as well. So the ability to see options and to negotiate among those options is not well-developed. Contrast that, for example, with a middle class household where the discussion will be about how many hot dogs, what should go on the hot dog, etc.

To teach students to use the “language of negotiation,” one must first teach them the

phrases they can use. Especially, beginning in grade four, have them use the “adult” voice in discussions. Direct teach the notion of an adult voice and give them phrases to use. Make them tally each time they use a phrase from the “adult” voice. There will be laughter. However, over time, if teachers also model that voice in their interactions with students, they will hear more of those kinds of questions and statements.

In addition to this, several staff development programs are available to teach peer negotiation. It is important that, as a part of the negotiation, the culture of origin is not denigrated, but rather the ability to negotiate is seen as a survival skill for the work and school setting.

Child Voice

Defensive, victimized, emotional, whining, lose mentality, strong negative nonverbals.

- Quit picking on me.
- You don't love me.
- You want me to leave.
- Nobody likes (loves) me.
- I hate you.
- You are ugly.
- You make me sick.
- It's your fault.
- Don't blame me.
- She (he) did it.
- You make me mad.
- You made me do it.

The child voice is also playful, spontaneous, curious, etc. The phrases listed occur in conflict or manipulative situations and impede resolution.

Adult Voice

Non-judgmental, free of negative nonverbals, factual, often in question format, attitude of win-win.

- In what ways could this be resolved?
- What criteria will be used to determine the effectiveness and quality of...?
- I would like to recommend...
- What are the choices in this situation?
- I am comfortable (uncomfortable) with...
- Options that could be considered are...
- For me to be comfortable...

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To the student who is already functioning as a parent, this is unbearable, and almost immediately, the incident is exacerbated beyond the original happening.

- I need the following things to occur...
- These are the consequences of that choice or action...
- We agree to disagree.

Parent Voice

Authoritative, directive, judgmental, evaluative, win-lose mentality, advising (sometimes threatening, demanding, punitive).

- You should not (should) do that.
- It is wrong (right) to do that.
- I would advise you to...
- That's stupid, immature, out of line, ridiculous.
- Life's not fair.
- Get busy.
- You are good, bad, worthless, beautiful (any judgmental, evaluative comment).
- You do as I say.
- If you weren't so..., this wouldn't happen to you.

The parent voice can also be very loving and supportive. These phrases listed occur during conflict and impede resolution. The internal parent voice can create shame and guilt.

Using Metaphor Stories

Another technique for working with students and adults is to use a metaphor story. A metaphor story will help an individual voice issues that affect their actions.

A metaphor story does not have any proper names in it. For example, a student keeps going to the nurse's office two or three times a week.

There is nothing wrong with her, yet she keeps going.

Adult to Jennifer, the girl: "Jennifer, I am going to tell a story and I need you to help me. It is about a fourth-grade girl much like yourself. I need you to help me tell the story because I am not in the fourth grade. Once upon a time, there was a girl who went to the nurse's office.

"Why did the girl go to the nurse's office? (Because she thought there was something wrong with her.) So the girl went to the nurse's office because she thought there was something wrong with her. Did the nurse find anything wrong with her? (No, the nurse did not.) So the nurse did not find anything wrong with her, yet the girl kept going to the nurse. Why did the girl keep going to the nurse? (Because she thought there was something wrong with her.) So the girl thought something was wrong with her. Why did the girl think there was something wrong with her? (She saw a TV show...)"

The story continues until the reason for the behavior is found and then the story needs to end on a positive note. "So, she went to the doctor, and he gave her tests and found that she was OK."

This is an actual case. What came out in the story was that Jennifer had seen a TV show in which a girl her age had died suddenly and had never known she was ill. Jennifer's parents took her to the doctor. He ran tests and told her she was fine. She did not go to the nurse's office anymore.

A metaphor story is to be used one-on-one when there is a need to understand the behavior and what is needed is to move the student to the appropriate behavior.

Teaching Hidden Rules

For example, if a student from poverty laughs when he is disciplined, the teacher needs to say, "Do you use the same rules to play all video games: No, you don't because you would lose. The same is true at school. There are street rules and there are school rules. Each set of rules helps you be successful where you are. So, at school, laughing when disciplined is not a choice. It does not help you to be successful. It only buys you more trouble. Keep a straight face and look contrite, even if you aren't."

That is an example of teaching a hidden rule. It can even be more straightforward with older

students. “Look, there are hidden rules on the street and hidden rules at school. What are they?” And then after the discussion, detail the rules that make the student successful where they are.

Students from poverty need to have at least two sets of behaviors from which to choose—one set for the streets, and one set for school and work.

What Does This Information Mean in the School or Work Setting?

- Students from poverty need to have at least two sets of behaviors from which to choose—one set for the streets, and one set for school and work.
- The purpose of discipline should be to promote successful behaviors at school.
- Teaching students to use the adult voice, i.e., the language of negotiation, is important for their success in and out of school and can become an alternative to physical aggression.
- Structure and choice need to be a part of the discipline approach.
- Discipline should be a form of instruction.

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