

**Fostering Responsibility in Children: "Contributory Activities"
and the role of the School
Part II**

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In my last column I described one approach for teaching children to be responsible, namely, to ask them to contribute in some manner to their world. I noted that some of the initial ideas for this approach arose from research I conducted a number of years ago when I asked adults to reflect upon one of their fondest memories of school, a memory in which a teacher said or did something that enhanced their self-esteem. The most common answer was when they were asked to help out or contribute in some manner to the school environment. In that column I gave several examples of these memories and would like to offer a few additional ones:

"My sixth grade teacher chose me to collect banking money from class members, keep records, and take the money to the bank. It made me feel competent and responsible."

"In the fourth grade I was asked to paint a mural along with three other students to be a permanent part of the school. It was wonderfully positive! Later, as an 8th grade teacher, I had a class paint a mural on a 1783 colonial farm in Connecticut."

"I had an eighth grade teacher who gave me the responsibility for creating the decorations/backdrops for the school holiday programs. It was a massive undertaking. She greatly encouraged my artistic interests and talents."

"When I was in high school, I was asked to spend a couple of hours a week in the junior high school next door tutoring students in math. Doing this was such a boost to my confidence and I felt I was really making a difference in the lives of others."

In last month's column I focused on fostering responsibility in the home environment by communicating to children we need their help rather than constantly reminding them that they had "chores" to do. In this column I want to apply this approach to the school environment.

In my practice as a clinical psychologist and as a former principal of a school in a locked door unit of a psychiatric hospital, I have been confronted with the question of designing and implementing the most effective interventions for motivating seemingly angry, resistant students and developing a more caring, compassionate, responsible attitude in these youth. Given the acts of violence that have occurred in our schools and the complaints I have heard on countless occasions from many educators about the large number of unmotivated, "alienated" students that inhabit our schools, the question of how to engage these students becomes even more critical.

I believe that one of the most powerful ways of reinforcing a more positive attitude in students is for schools to place a high priority on creating opportunities for students to participate in what I call "contributory activities," that is, activities in which they are involved in contributing not only to the school but to their surrounding neighborhood. These activities, which can be tied to all kinds of academic work, serve to reinforce a feeling of belonging and making a positive difference, and of strengthening a sense of self-worth.

The belief in the efficacy of "contributory activities" is shared by many others. For example, Albina Gaudino and Michele Tamaren described how students with visual handicaps and learning problems produced piggy banks to sell and sponsored a bake sale and a raffle with the proceeds going to a needy family; these activities enhanced the students' self-esteem and reinforced the many academic skills that were involved in the project. Similarly, Mary Sarver reported the emotional and cognitive benefits of having students between the ages of 8-12 plan and take care of a school garden in which flowers and vegetables were grown. Sarver noted, "It was not at all surprising that many of my students asked to take some of their harvest from the garden to their other teachers. The flowers and vegetables they had grown were silent proof they could succeed."

Child development specialist Urie Bronfenbrenner recommends that schools implement a "curriculum for caring" that would provide students with experiences to learn about and engage in acts of caring with such populations as "old people, younger children, the sick and the lonely." Relatedly, Michael Rutter, a British psychiatrist who has studied the school environment found that "ample opportunities for children to take

responsibility and to participate in the running of their school lives appear conducive to good attainments, attendance, and behavior. Thus academic outcome was better in schools where a high proportion of pupils had been a captain, homework monitor, or some equivalent position."

I believe that many students who have been labeled as "resistant," "oppositional," or "unmotivated" can be reached more effectively by providing carefully planned and supervised activities that accentuate their capabilities rather than relying almost exclusively on negative consequences such as suspension or even retention that ironically often intensify their antipathy for school. It is for this reason that when I am asked to consult about students who are presenting difficulties in school (e.g., they are not doing their work or they are hostile towards teachers or they skip classes), a couple of the questions I raise are, "Putting aside state laws, what is in it for this student to come to school? What brings this student a sense of accomplishment in school?" By asking these questions I am not recommending that we should not hold students accountable for misbehavior, especially behaviors that pose a threat to themselves and others. Rather I am suggesting that we might be more effective in changing misbehavior by finding ways to communicate to these students that we need their help and that they have something to contribute to the school environment rather than focusing our interventions exclusively on punishment. I have observed angry, seemingly unmotivated students become more cooperative when we enlist them in helping others.

Yet it has been my experience as I consult with educators about students who are angry and not succeeding that there are some educators who perceive any suggestion for providing "contributory activities" as "giving in to the student" or as one educator told me at a workshop, "Your philosophy is to spoil children and to reinforce negative behavior." I have also heard, "Why should I allow her to tutor a younger child in math, when she won't do her own homework?" or "If I allow her to take care of the class pet or tutor a younger child, all the other children will want to do it as well" or "Having children help out will take time away from teaching."

My responses to these comments are that to reach many angry, unmotivated students, we must have the courage to modify our unsuccessful interventions, interventions that may actually increase a student's lack of interest in school. As I noted above, this should not be

taken to imply that we refrain from applying consequences, but rather that we also expend energy on developing innovative strategies that will help to alter these students' negative views so that they begin to perceive the school environment as a place in which their strengths rather than deficits are highlighted; if this change of attitude is achieved, increased cooperation, accountability, and productivity are likely to follow. I would also contend that there are enough activities in schools to engage all students, whether they are demonstrating problems or not, in tasks that convey a sense of contribution and belonging. I wish to emphasize that these activities need not take any time from teaching but rather can become an integral part of the curricula and interwoven with the teaching of all academic skills and content.

Given the importance of what I consider to be a more positive approach to lessening anger and alienation in our schools while reinforcing motivation, responsibility, learning, and caring, let's examine several more examples that involve students in the act of helping. As you read these examples, reflect upon your own life, your own experiences in school, and your current experiences. Can you think of times your sense of self-worth and motivation were reinforced as a child or adolescent because someone conveyed a belief in your ability to contribute to others? Even as adults our self-esteem and positive feelings towards our place of employment are enhanced when we assist others and feel that we make a positive difference in the workplace. I have often said that if we do not insure that students have the opportunity to make a positive difference, they will discover ways to make a negative difference.

I visited an elementary school and talked with some students. They gave me a colorful button that I show at most of my workshops, a button with the inscription "SOS, Serving Our School." The SOS program was developed by a teacher at the school who had become intrigued by the notion of contributory activities. The program involved each student being "on duty" at some point during the week to perform various errands for the school staff (e.g., teachers, principal, custodian, secretary). While on duty they wore the SOS badge. In my discussion with the students it was obvious that the program was a source of pride and achievement for them and they looked forward to the contributions they could make.

Another popular contributory activity involves the use of students as tutors, a practice that has been found to benefit both the student who is doing the tutoring as well as the student receiving instruction. In this regard I am reminded of the impressive results of the Valued Youth Partnership Program developed in San Antonio in which the dropout of young adolescents was cut significantly, primarily involving them as tutors for younger children in the elementary school. A report, which was issued by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development and titled, "Turning Points: Preparing Youth for the 21st Century," commended the program, noting, "A rise in tutors' self-esteem is the most noticeable effect of the program. . . . As a result only two percent of all tutors have dropped out of school. This is remarkable, given that all of these students had been held back twice or more and were reading at least two grade levels below their current grade placement. Disciplinary problems have become less severe, grades have improved, and attendance of tutors has soared."

Billy, a nine-year-old child with low self-esteem and learning problems, who demonstrated his dislike of school by hiding behind the bushes next to the school building. In interviewing Billy I discovered that the one thing he enjoyed doing and that he thought he did very well was taking care of his pet dog. Consequently, I consulted with the school principal and Billy was recruited as the "pet monitor" of the school, a position that involved his taking care of various pets in the school, writing a brief pet care manual that was eventually bound and placed in the school library (prior to this point Billy did not like to write, but with the encouragement and assistance of his teacher he wrote the manual because he believed he had words of wisdom to offer), and speaking to all the classrooms in the building about the care of pets. His resistance to school, his anger, and his lack of motivation decreased markedly with his new position in school, a position that highlighted his strengths and conveyed the important message that his presence made a positive difference in the school.

A final example comes from a fourth grade teacher who arranged for her class to become penpals with residents of a local nursing home. The students' motivation to write and their sense of self-worth increased since they recognized that they were making a difference in the lives of the elderly. An added benefit was that the outlook of the elderly improved as they responded to the letters of their penpals and invited them to a luncheon at the nursing home. From what I was told, it was a very heartwarming, emotional luncheon.

As is evident from this column and my last column, I believe that one of the most effective ways of teaching responsibility and compassion to our youth is to create opportunities for them to help others. By so doing we communicate the message, "We believe in you and we believe you have a great deal to offer your world." This message, which reinforces responsibility, caring, motivation, and connectedness, is one that should be conveyed to all of our children. It is truly one of the most important messages we can transmit as parents and teachers and other caregivers in preparing our children for the challenges they will confront in their adult lives.

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