

Is your classroom under control?:

Discipline in the nonteacher's classroom

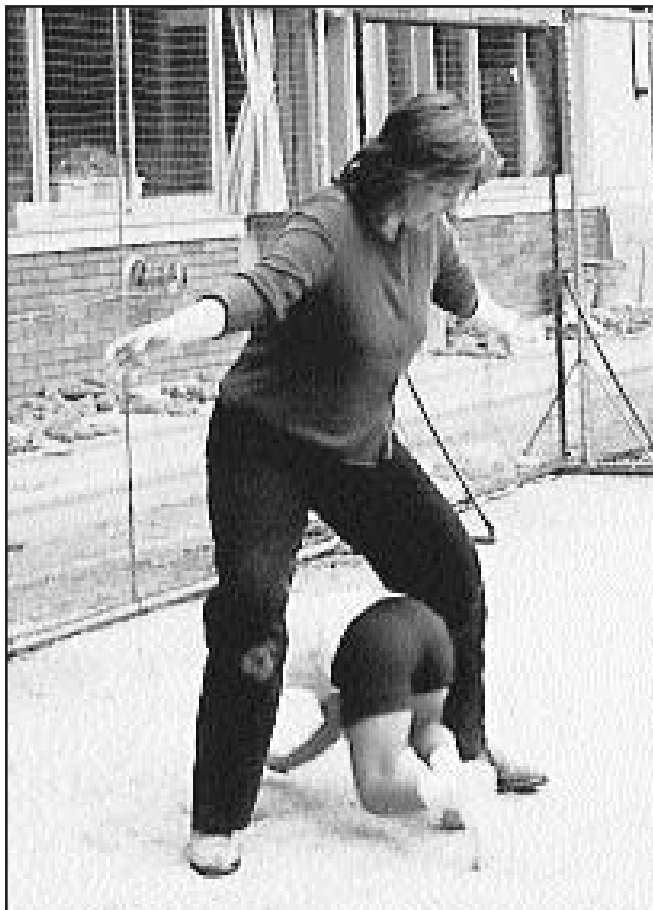
By Chris Hunt and Alison Miyake

What kind of discipline problems do you have in your classroom?

Chris Hunt: Once upon a time the sun and the wind had an argument about a man wearing a coat. The sun shone and shone but the man would not put on the coat. Then the wind blew like crazy and the man jumped into the coat quicker than you can say, "That's not the story I know!"

So while I understand the concerns that prompt this kind of question (kids running wild, not listening, jabbering on in Japanese, arguing and fighting etc.), I feel that it is looking at things the wrong way round. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that this kind of question creates more problems than it solves. It presupposes that there are certain norms that children should follow and certain standards of behaviour. Built into the question is the acceptance of a power hierarchy. The teacher instructs and the children obey.

Having said this, the other week I had one of the worst classroom experiences of my life. The class consisted of near on 60 five-year-olds. I was at a nursery school I go to once a month. It was only the second time and the first time



Alison Miyake on the playground.

had gone well. I had boys trying to punch me in the groin and both girls and boys trying to insert fingers up my behind. Other kids were intent on ransacking my bags. It was a teacher's worst nightmare!

Alison Miyake: I went to a meeting of all the Assistant English Teachers (AETs) from Yamaguchi-ken in March, and fingers up the bum was the first problem mentioned. I think being very clear on any behaviour that you like or don't like, especially with regard to your own person is important. I would try to grab the kid, hold him by the arms so that I could look him in the eyes and say in a firm voice, "No" or "Stop" or "Don't do that". I have been surprised to hear that the Japanese teachers(s) will often just stand back and watch and do nothing to assist the poor victim. I think it is important that the AET isn't forced to deal with the situation on his own, and if the teachers are standing watching, I would ask them to help you. I would also take it up with the principal. Teaching kids powerful English like this will also help them when they get into a situation where they don't like what is being done to them.

CH: Yes, control language like "Don't" is some of the first language I teach. It's imperative that everybody agrees to respect such language, especially teachers! I agree it's important to face children and tell them clearly and firmly when you don't like something. Recently in another kindergarten class I had a four-year-old boy spitting at me. He ignored me when I stood and told him "Don't". After the third time, I sat on the floor and took him firmly by the shoulders so that we were abruptly face to face. I started to talk to him in English saying I didn't like spitting. Suddenly it seemed he realised what he had been doing, which was antagonising a being much larger and stronger than himself. He demanded to be let go. I said, "Sure", and let him go but told him again not to spit. He stopped. Of course one can wonder why he had started in the first place.

AM: Yes, what about the kids who are acting up? In my elementary school classes there have been two kinds. There are the ones who LOVE English and know a little bit, so are eager to shout out the answers. I usually find them a good stimulus for the rest of the students and say "Great!" or "You know a lot of English". (Once, I tried a "Sh..." so that other kids would have a chance to answer, but I felt it backfired, since I was speaking only English and he probably didn't know why he was shushed—you should always work within your own comfort level)

There are also kids who act out because they DON'T want to be there, or because they feel their needs aren't being met. In a big classroom, it is hard for the teacher to give attention to everyone, and I sometimes find that the

stricter the Japanese teacher is, the more kids there are who refuse to participate in my classroom. Let's face it, the English class goes by different rules and many kids see this as an opportunity to play with their freedom. I think this is one of the main reasons why kids tend to physically mob the foreign teacher: it is partly wanting to test what the rules are in this new situation. It is also partly a testing of how much freedom they really have. I have had kids who would refuse to take part in an activity. I usually acknowledge them by saying, "Come and join us" or "It's fun!", but then let them choose whether or not to participate. People don't learn when they are in rebellion mode.

CH: I think it's important to give children choice. For years my general rule of thumb was simple. A child has a right not to participate in any activity but does not have the right to disrupt the activity. Now I'm questioning this idea even though it has served me well. I'm increasingly concerned with issues of democracy in the classroom and I hope we'll return to this later, but right now I'd like to ask you for your thoughts and feelings on being mobbed.

AM: I haven't had many experiences of that, except maybe in cases with 3-5-year-olds. I think it is partly because I have been going to my schools for many years and they know I live in Japan, and I have eaten lunch in the cafeteria and played on the playground, so many of the students know me. It also helps, of course, that I can speak Japanese. I sometimes wonder how much of the mobbing and difference in attitude can be attributed to the fact that kids know the rules are different outside of Japan, but don't know what the rules are. When I have been in a situation like that, I usually try to step sideways or backwards to prevent myself from being surrounded. One thing I have noticed, is that elementary and younger kids in Japan do tend to have a somewhat closer (parent-substitute) relationship with their teachers, and therefore there is more touching and less personal space than I am used to or, sometimes, prefer.

CH: It's true that people have a different sense of personal space. I don't mind physical contact with children. They can even hit me and that's OK. What I look at is attitude. If a child is trying to be friendly or play tag or something I have no problem with being hit. But I dislike being treated as some object to be disposed of by a TV super-hero. I usually disdain such behaviour, but it's important to develop a feeling for the mood of the group. Children, especially young children, are very sensitive to the energy levels in a room. Even the weather can affect patterns of behaviour.

AM: That was another good question at the AET workshop: what do you do with a class of 50 or 100 students that are totally wound up about the AET coming? What ideas do you have for calming activities to help people settle down and get into thinking mode? We talked about helping the kids let off steam at the beginning of class by using a song or dance that gets them moving and that they can sing in a loud voice, but that involves the group working together. Breaking into groups or pairs for an activity so everyone gets a chance to talk is good. The last thing you want to do



Chris Hunt and friends.

when kids are already bouncing off the walls is to give them a real running around activity. Such an activity is better for when the kids need some energy injected into them. Feeling and reacting to the pace of the classroom can be one of the most difficult things for a new teacher.

CH: I think it's important to develop the skill of pacing and leading. Go where the kids are first and then bring them to where you would like them to be. So if the kids are being noisy, be noisy and then perhaps make a game of it. Use your arms to indicate the volume of noise to aim at. Say, "Be noisy" and be noisy, then say, "Be quiet" and as the noise subsides, whisper "Be quiet". Hold the silence for a second or two and then get them to be noisy again. Repeat as desired and then move onto something else. At all times, if possible turn problems of simple disruption into a game.

Actually games are difficult to over-rate. With large classes start out by teaching classroom management phrases through games. For example, play a command game and time how long it takes the class to respond. Kids like to compete against their previous time. Typical commands include: "Make a circle", "Make a line", "Make two lines", "Make five lines", "Go there", "Come here", "Mingle" etc.

The last command is especially interesting. Never assume anything! Have an activity that relies on children moving around talking to each other? You can bet that when you introduce it, the kids will stand in clumps or not move at all. But if they already know how to mingle you can use that command to start the game, "Ready, steady, mingle!"

Physical structures are worth thinking about. Very young children may not be able to make a circle. So you could put stickers down on the floor or give them a rope to hold onto. In kindergarten one class took almost a year to be able to make a circle, hold hands and not charge backwards and forwards. We just kept working at it. Perseverance without expectation. Some classes may be able to make a circle at the beginning of a class but not be able to keep it. In such circumstances I structure activities so that once the circle is lost I don't need to remake it.

With large classes having the active support of the children's regular teachers is important. The more they partici-



Alison and Chris in class.

pate and are willing to use English, the more things will go smoothly.

AM: This brings up a problem that I have had. My discipline is “looser” than that of my Japanese teachers. I had a teacher walk out of class once and end up in tears. She started the class with the kids in tight rows, everyone standing at attention. They said “Good afternoon” and then she was waiting for them to say something else. No-one, including myself, could figure out what she was getting at. It turned out to be “How are you?” since that is the way I usually start my classes, but it was really ironic to have 35 people shouting it out and me responding. A good example of why choral repetition is not real conversation!

Then some of the kids were restless (rebellious) and she tried to get them back into proper order again (the silent, “I’m waiting” routine) and the kids got even more restless. Eventually she ended up moving some of the kids in the front row, and someone backed into someone else who fell and accused her of pushing him. She got really upset and left the room.

So what to do in this situation? First, I have to respect that it is her classroom and she is the one that works with the students all the time, so I need to show consideration for her way of doing things. As a parent, I have been in situations where I have needed a time-out myself. (There are lots of times where you get locked into a position and lose sight of the big issue or principle.) I started the class and we did our activities, the whole time with me trying to think of what I was going to do. I left a few minutes at the end and said (in Japanese) “We have a problem”. I let them try to guess what it was, and one of them said that their teacher wasn’t there. I then acknowledged the teacher’s feelings, saying that she probably felt mad or sad, and asked them what they thought they could do. We agreed that they should apologise. I wanted to show the group that they should take responsibility for one of their members being missing.

What happened was that three of the (quiet, well-behaved) girls came down to the staff room to apologise and the teacher (who was crying) said “No, it’s not you”. The principal came out and asked what was going on and the teacher explained, with the principal immediately trying to pick out

names of students to call into his office. I talked with him afterwards and explained the situation and said that I thought it was important that no one be singled out since it was a genuine misunderstanding. Any “punishment” or “lecture” should focus on the group as a whole, and show that they all have responsibility for what goes on in the classroom.

CH: It’s important to realise that these things can happen. It’s usually worth analysing a situation afterwards and thinking about what could have been done differently. Looking back on my experience of the other week, I identified several things I’d done that probably contributed to my being mobbed. Several of the children were saying, “Yummy, yummy” to me, and I didn’t really take the time to find out why. I was too intent on pursuing my lesson plan, which is probably the single greatest cause of problems. As soon as we get locked into our own agendas and start ignoring the here and now we are inviting trouble. Essentially what we are doing is failing to treat the children with respect. Respect must be mutual or there is no real respect at all.

AM: Yes: I think “discipline” should be more about modelling behaviour by showing respect for students and giving them individual attention to understand where they are coming from, and not about punishment. This is as true for parenting as it is for “teaching”.

CH: Yes, it is a universal.

In part two we’ll look at moving beyond discipline.

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Alison Miyake is a mother before she is a teacher. Her daughter (now 4) has taught her more about learning than teaching has. Until last year, a teacher at three elementary schools and to younger children privately, Alison is now taking a year off to pursue interests in training teachers, including herself. She recently appeared on NHK’s “Wai Wai Yamaguchi-Buchi International” teaching English and international understanding to a class of grade two students at her daughter’s future school. She can be reached at mbi@joy.ocn.ne.jp.