

[No More "Sage on a Stage"](#)

Category : [October/November/December 2002](#)

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TEACHING

No More "Sage on a Stage"

What kids need today is a "guide on the side"

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Last year when I began teaching at a middle school here on the island of Kauai, the principal suggested that I might find much had changed since I last taught in a public school classroom thirty years ago. Most students would present no disciplinary problems, she assured me, but a few would be daily challenges. She was right about those few, except for the fact that they were more than a "challenge."

The laws for discipline in schools have also changed since I last taught. Not so many years ago corporal punishment was allowed in class and vigorously practiced. Physical abuse is now an illegal method of maintaining classroom discipline in 27 of the 50 US states. Hawaii is one of these.

Although it is true that students are quick to obey if threatened with a beating or public humiliation, most professional educators, psychologists and physicians agree that such violent and hurtful management methods are not effective in

actually helping students learn. Nor do they assist in preparing them for responsible adulthood. I was never allowed to hit, slap or paddle, and I chose not to humiliate or verbally abuse my students to maintain classroom control. But still, it was up to me to establish rules and set the learning pace for the children in my classes. This is one thing that has not changed through the years.

With time and through experience, I learned to stop a lot of misbehavior before it started by giving students plenty of things to do, thereby simply leaving them little opportunity to cause trouble. I also tried to win them over rather than win over them. By this I mean I did not strive to be in charge, but rather tried to gain respect by giving respect so that the kids in my classes would willingly accept my authority.

Since I chose not to demand this power as my right and wanted to win respect, I had to develop some practices that would gain the students' favor. This was not easy. It took some trial and error, and I made some mistakes. I discovered that, as difficult as it might be in some situations, it was always best to be kind and avoid anger. Students will cooperate with teachers who treat them with genuine consideration.

Yet, even promising students tested my limits. Some worked very hard to push the envelope of acceptable behavior and prove my resolve. I learned to be patient. One thing I found never worked was backing a student into a corner. When I asked my principal to describe the most common problem situations she had witnessed, she said the worst ones were caused by teachers verbally backing kids into a corner.

Last year I completely lost my temper with a student. The next day before class I apologized to him. To my amazement he apologized back to me, admitting he had not behaved well. After that our relationship improved one hundred percent.

I also discovered that it was extremely beneficial to clearly state ahead of time what the consequences would be for breaking classroom rules. For instance, I would tell my students that if they turned in homework late, they would receive half credit; or if they came to class late they would have to run laps outside. This method worked well. It made them take responsibility. Accepting responsibility for one's actions is difficult for many students. They try to play the blame game the "He made me do it" ploy. However, once kids realize they have a choice, and that choices have consequences, they start following the rules.

I also found that it was important to follow through when students chose to not obey the rules. Without this follow-through, any limitations I established were meaningless. To do all of this and maintain true sympathy was not at all easy. But it was very necessary. This is what my students taught me.

I firmly believe that with clearly stated rules and enforced consequences, as well as with unremitting kindness and patience, teachers can be successful without resorting to physical or emotional abuse. A phrase often heard in America today is: A teacher is no longer the "sage on the stage," but rather a "guide on the side." That insight describes well a most important aspect of these changing times in the field of

education. With so much diversified knowledge so easily accessible to kids these days, a teacher's most basic impetus to serve must necessarily be different now than it was a generation ago. First of all, teachers cannot possibly teach everything, nor should they feel impelled to, especially since in many areas of life a sharp, young, Web-savvy student might know more than they do. Today, the greatest gift a teacher can give is maturity maturity in helping students discriminate what they should learn, maturity in teaching students the enjoyment of the learning process itself and maturity in inspiring students to successfully coexist while the learning is going on.

As my husband points out, teaching is a grueling, challenging job and takes an enormous amount of energy. It's much more than going into a classroom and giving information to kids that you or a "curriculum specialist" believe is important. Everything said and done in class teaches kids something. There is no simple method that works everywhere and always, but there is a well-supplied toolbox of varied ways to relate to kids. Multiple tools are necessary because each child is different and so is each teacher. Both must learn. In the end, wisdom is the key. And for wisdom, who is the teacher and who the student?