Chapter Seven

CLASS MEETINGS

By now you know that the effectiveness of the positive approach depends on adult attitudes of mutual respect and concern for the long-range effects on children. It has been promised that children who experience the kind of interaction outlined in this book will learn self-discipline, cooperation, responsibility, resilience, resourcefulness, and problem-solving skills.

The culmination of all these promises and attitudes is most fully realized and experienced in regularly scheduled family and class meetings. Such meetings provide the best possible circumstances for adults and children to learn the democratic procedure of cooperation, mutual respect, and social interest. Class meetings and family meetings are one of the best ways to give children an opportunity to develop strength in all of the Significant Seven Perceptions and Skills mentioned in chapter 1. These are the important long-range goals that parents and teachers will realize when they implement family and class meetings. However, some parents and teachers are motivated

by the fringe benefits of eliminating discipline problems. This is fine, as long as they understand that eliminating or reducing discipline problems is a fringe benefit, and not the primary goal, of family and class meetings—but what a great fringe benefit it is.

Teachers are relieved to experience the fringe benefit of eliminating the roles of policeman, judge, jury, and executioner. Whenever students come with problems, teachers can simply request that the problem be put on the class-meeting agenda. This alone is enough of an immediate solution to give satisfaction, while providing for a cooling-off period before trying to solve the problem. Learning and practicing problem-solving skills, however, is a benefit for students that will serve them in every important life endeavor.

Students are often able to solve problems much better than the teacher, simply because there are more of them. They have many excellent ideas when they are allowed and encouraged to express them. One reason discipline problems are eliminated is that students feel encouraged when they are listened to, when they are taken seriously, and when their thoughts and ideas are validated. They also have ownership in the solutions and are motivated to follow rules or solutions they have helped create. Teachers find that children are much more willing to cooperate when they have been involved in the decisions, even when the final solution is one that has been suggested by the teacher many times in the past to no avail.

There are many more benefits derived from meetings that involve children. Teachers are frequently amazed at the academic and social skills children learn in class meetings. Because the children are intensively involved in solving problems that are so relevant for them, they learn listening skills, language development, extended thinking, logical consequences of behavior, memory skills, and objective thinking skills. They also gain an appreciation for the value and mechanics of learning.

Before outlining things to do in order to have a successful class meeting, we will look at some attitudes and actions to avoid:

1. Do not use the class meeting as another platform for lecturing and moralizing. It is essential to be as objective and nonjudgmental as possible. This does not mean you cannot have input into the meetings. You can still put items on the agenda and give your opinion.
2. Do not use the class meeting as a guise to continue excessive control. Children see through this approach and will not cooperate.

Class meetings should be held every day (or at least three times a week) in elementary schools. If class meetings are not held often enough, students will be discouraged from putting items on the agenda, because it will take too long to get to them. Elementary-school students will not have time to learn and retain the process if class meetings are not held often enough. Middle-school and high-school students can learn the class meeting process quicker and retain it longer, so once a week may be enough. However, upper-grade students still cooperate better when they are listened to and respected for their abilities on a regular basis. For this reason, some middle and high schools have a home-room period for class meetings.

A cooling-off period of at least one day is recommended before discussing a problem. It is discouraging to have to wait much longer than three days. This is another reason why once-a-week meetings may be ineffective. (A shorter cooling-off period is recommended for younger children. In kindergarten, one hour is often long enough.)

In the first edition of *Positive Discipline*, it was suggested that decisions be made by a majority vote. A majority vote is appropriate when the topic being discussed concerns everyone

in the class. When this is the case, a majority vote does not cause feelings of division in a class meeting when a positive atmosphere has been created. It provides a great opportunity for students to learn that everyone doesn't think and feel the same way they do. However, some teachers continue the problem-solving process until consensus is reached.

When the topic being discussed focuses on one or two students (even though the whole class may be concerned and wants to help), the students involved should be allowed to choose the suggestion they think would be most helpful to them. This encourages students to feel good about being accountable for their mistakes, and to appreciate the good ideas they can receive from other students who are focused on solutions instead of blame, shame, or pain.

I used to tell teachers to prepare for a month of hell when starting class meetings, but that it was worth it if they understood the long-range benefits. The reason for the month of hell was that students are not used to helping one another; they are more used to punishment. They are not used to seeing mistakes as opportunities to learn and solve problems; they are used to avoiding accountability because of their fear of blame, shame, and pain.

However, I have since found that the month of hell can be eliminated when teachers take time during the first four class meetings to teach students the skills of the Eight Building Blocks for Effective Class Meetings, which are outlined in our book *Positive Discipline in the Classroom*.[1] The Eight Building Blocks for Effective Class Meetings are:

1. Forming a circle
2. Practicing compliments and appreciations

[1]Jane Nelsen, Lynn Lott, and H. Stephen Glenn, *Positive Discipline in the Classroom*, Rocklin, Calif.: Prima Publishing, 1993.

3. Creating an agenda
4. Developing communication skills
5. Learning about separate realities
6. Solving problems through role-playing and brainstorming
7. Recognizing the four reasons people do what they do
8. Applying logical consequences and *other nonpunitive solutions*

We have developed a *Positive Discipline in the Classroom Facilitator's Guide*[2] that contains activities for teachers and activities for students to help them learn and practice skills in each of the Eight Building Blocks. Children need to develop skills and a positive attitude about nonpunitive solutions before they try to help one another. Several ideas must be explained, discussed, and experienced through the experiential activities before actual agenda items are dealt with.

PURPOSES OF CLASS MEETINGS

1. To give compliments
2. To help one another
3. To solve problems
4. To plan events

Many teachers start every meeting by asking the children, "What are the two main purposes of class meetings?" The two main purposes are to help one another and to solve problems.

[2]Jane Nelsen and Lynn Lott, *Positive Discipline in the Classroom Facilitator's Guide*, Fair Oaks, Calif.: Sunrise Press, 1993. Available from Empowering People Books, Tape & Videos, 1-800-456-7770.

SOME OF THE GOALS OF CLASS MEETINGS

Teaching Mutual Respect

Teach children the meaning of mutual respect by having a discussion of the following questions:

1. Why is it disrespectful when more than one person talks at the same time? (We can't hear what everyone is saying; the person who is supposed to be talking feels others don't care; and so on.)
2. Why is it disrespectful to disturb others? (They can't concentrate and learn from what is going on.)
3. Why is it important to listen when others are speaking? (So that we can learn from one another, to show respect for one another, and because we like to have others listen to us.)

Giving Compliments, Acknowledgments, and Appreciations

Middle- and high-school students usually prefer using the words "acknowledgments and appreciations." Elementary-school students usually do better using the word "compliments"; however, the concept is the same.

Spend some time with students exploring the meaning of compliments or acknowledgments and appreciations. This can be done informally during the first meeting. Compliments, acknowledgments, and appreciations should focus on what others do in the following areas:

- Accomplishments
- Helpfulness to others
- Anything someone might feel good about

Have the students brainstorm for specific examples in each of these areas. Then teach them to use the words, "I would like

to compliment or acknowledge (a person's name) for (something specific that person did)." Using these words helps students stay on the task of recognizing what others do, rather than what they wear or how they look. I have visited hundreds of classrooms to observe class meetings in schools that have adopted this program. In every classroom where they did not use the prescribed phrasing, the compliments or acknowledgments were less specific and more superficial.

At first many children might say, "I would like to compliment Jill for being my friend." Let this go for a while during the learning process, but eventually the group could again brainstorm on how to be specific about what a friend *does* that we would like to recognize and appreciate.

The teacher may start by giving several compliments (from notes taken during the day when noticing things children did that would merit recognition). Many teachers model giving compliments every day, making sure they eventually cover every child in their classroom, a few each day.

During the first meeting, have everyone give at least one compliment to make sure they know how to do it. If anyone has difficulty, have the class help by asking if anyone has any ideas on something that happened to this student during the day that he could compliment someone for, like playing with him during recess, helping with homework, loaning a pencil, or listening to a problem. After this, compliments can be optional.

It is also a good idea to teach students to say thank you after receiving a compliment. You may have several class meetings just for compliments while the students learn this process. Many teachers have shared that compliments alone have been significant in creating a more positive atmosphere in their classrooms. After the initial awkwardness, children love looking for, giving, and receiving positive recognition. Where else do they get this valuable training?

Teaching Logical Consequences

Teach the children to use logical consequences before trying to solve any problems. Start by having them brainstorm about natural consequences by asking what happens in the following circumstances if no one interferes:

- If you stand in the rain? (You get wet.)
- If you play on the freeway? (You might get killed.)
- If you don't sleep? (You get tired.)
- If you don't eat? (You get hungry.)

Next explain that logical consequences are things that can be done to help others learn to be responsible for their behavior when it is not appropriate to let them experience a natural consequence. Explain the Three Rs of Logical Consequences as described in chapter 5. It is a good idea to make a poster of the Three Rs for the students to refer to. Then have them brainstorm and discuss logical consequences for the following problems:

- Someone who writes on a desk
- Someone who rides the tether ball
- Someone who doesn't do his or her work during class time
- Someone who is late for school

It is much easier to give the students practice by working on hypothetical situations, so that there is a lack of emotional involvement and blame. After receiving as many suggestions as possible, and writing them down, go over each one and have the children see how well they fit the criteria for the Three Rs of Logical Consequences. Have them discuss their reasons why they think each suggestion is or isn't related, respectful, and reasonable. Also have them discuss how each suggestion will be helpful to the person, or how it will be hurtful. Have the

class decide which suggestions should be eliminated because they do not meet the guidelines of the Three Rs or because they are in some other way hurtful.

Going Beyond Logical Consequences

Although logical consequences can be effective to help students learn from their mistakes and encourage them to do better, I am concerned about how often I see logical consequences misused. Too many teachers try to disguise punishment by calling it a logical consequence. Students then learn to do the same thing. Many class meetings have started to feel like kangaroo courts because teachers and students focus on logical consequences that feel more hurtful than helpful to the students involved.

Too often logical consequences focus on the past instead of the future. Learning from the past so we can do better in the future is a good idea. However, it is counterproductive to focus on the past in order to inflict blame, shame, and pain.

Another mistake is to think that finding a logical consequence is the answer to every behavior problem. I hope you are finding many other possibilities throughout this book. Even though an understanding of logical consequences can be helpful to teachers and students, I like to emphasize that it is important to *focus on solutions instead of consequences.* When given the opportunity, students can come up with a wealth of solutions that don't have anything to do with consequences. Let them practice brainstorming solutions to the above hypothetical problems.

THE HOW-TOS OF CLASS MEETINGS

Using the Agenda

Introduce the agenda to the group. Some teachers reserve space on the blackboard. Others keep a sheet of paper on a clipboard

where it is easily accessible. Explain to the students that you are going to teach them to solve problems rather than trying to solve all of them by yourself. From now on, instead of coming to you with problems, they can put their name on the agenda, followed by a few words to help them remember what the problem is about. Warn them that at first they may forget and still come to you for solutions, but you will remind them to put it on the agenda. Eventually they will get tired of hearing you sound like a broken record and will remember to put problems on the agenda. Of course they can also use the agenda for problems they have been unsuccessful at solving themselves. These problems will then be solved during the class meetings.

Anytime teachers or parents ask me for solutions to problems they are having with children, my consistent answer is, "Put it on the agenda." In the school where I was an elementary-school counselor, I was called "the broken record." I always suggest meetings because children will come up with the best solutions, and are most willing to cooperate when they are involved in the decisions.

When solutions do not seem to work, simply put the problem back on the agenda for more discussion and problem-solving in a cooperative atmosphere. When you yourself put items on the agenda, be sure to own the problem, rather than trying to place blame. Children feel good about helping you with your problem. The items on the agenda are to be covered in chronological order in the amount of time allotted. Any problem that is not finished before the end of the meeting will be continued the next day.

Quite often, by the time an agenda item comes up for discussion, the person who put it on the agenda will say that it has already been taken care of. Some adults say, "Fine," and go on to the next item. Others ask the child if she would like to share the solution.

Using the Cooling-Off Period

Explain why problems can't be solved when people are upset. (When people are upset, they are irrational and unwilling to listen to other points of view.) With older children you can stimulate discussion by asking them why. With younger children, explain that the purpose of waiting a few hours or a few days before solving problems on the agenda is to give people a chance to cool off and calm down so that problems can be solved respectfully.

Meeting in a Circle

It is important that students sit in a circle for class meetings. Remaining at their desks not only creates physical barriers, which retard the process, but I have yet to see a class meeting where students could keep from fidgeting with items in or on their desk while remaining at their desks.

Take time to train students to move their desks with as little noise and confusion as possible. Some classes spend several days practicing. I have seen every kind of desk moved from all kinds of arrangements so that students could sit in a circle facing one another. The shortest time was fifteen seconds. Most can do it in thirty to forty-five seconds.

Training can involve several steps. First you might ask the students what they think they need to do to move with as little noise and confusion as possible. They will usually come up with all the things necessary for a smooth transition. Then ask them how many times they think they will need to practice before they can implement their good ideas effectively.

Some teachers like to assign seats. On the first day they have one student at a time move his or her desk and put the chair into the assigned space. Other teachers have a few move at a time, by row or by team. If they are noisy and disruptive, have them practice until they solve the problem. Once they have learned to do it quietly, they can all move at once.

Class Meeting Structure

The steps listed below were adapted from guidelines by Frank Meder and are helpful for effective class meetings. Before I learned these steps, many of the class meetings I conducted failed because there was not enough structure. When students were not immediately impressed with what I was trying to accomplish and became disruptive, I would give up, commenting to the students, "Well, obviously you don't want a class meeting now. We'll try again later when you are ready." In other words, not only did I not take responsibility for my own lack of readiness, but I also gave in to anarchy.

1. Begin with compliments.

Pass an item (such as a bean bag or pencil) around the circle. Students who want to give someone a compliment can take the opportunity when they have the item in their hand. Go around the circle once so every student has an opportunity to give a compliment or to pass. When going around the circle, it is important to start and stop at the same place. This avoids the accusations of "unfair" when a teacher calls on students at random and arbitrarily chooses when to stop. There is always one who claims he didn't get called on.

2. Read the first item on the agenda.

Ask the person who wrote the item if it is still a problem. If she says no, go on to the next item. If another person is involved, ask her to explain her side of the story.

3. Pass an item around the circle for comments and suggestions.

Start with the person who wrote the item on the agenda and end just before this person. Some teachers like to go around the circle twice because students often think of more to say or have more suggestions after listening to others.

4. Write down every suggestion exactly as it is given.

You will find suggestions on what to do if children are being hurtful rather than helpful under "Common Questions" at the end of this chapter.

5. Read all the suggestions before asking the student involved which one he or she thinks will be the most helpful.

When more than one student is involved, each can choose a solution. They may choose different ones.

6. Ask the student when he would like to do whatever he has chosen.

You may want to give a limited choice, such as today or tomorrow, or during recess or after school. There is some psychological benefit in giving students a choice of when they would like to try the suggestion. It gives them a sense of positive power and commitment.

This method provides a process that can be followed step by step; however, it is not so rigid as to eliminate room for teacher individuality and creativity. Teachers all over the world have learned this process and then taught me new ideas as I observed them in action. Many of their ideas are shared in this and other chapters.

Hand signals are a great way for all the children to let their opinions be known during a class meeting without being disrespectful or disruptive. Teach the children to move their hands crossing back and forth over their lap when they want to express disagreement. When they agree with what is being said they can move their fist up and down above their shoulder. Hand signals are offensive to some teachers. They claim they couldn't stand to have someone waving their hands and arms around while they were talking. I can understand their concern. It would certainly bother me, especially if the movement was indicating disagreement with what I was saying. However, if you closely observe children engaged in this process, you will discover that it does not seem distracting to them.

After observing a class meeting where a child chose the suggestion to apologize in front of the class for a misbehavior that was put on the agenda, one adult objected. She felt it was humiliating for the child. I invited her to ask the child and other members of the class if it bothered them to apologize in front of everyone. The class unanimously agreed that it did not bother them. The point is that we should finely tune our awareness of the children's world, rather than projecting our own world onto them.

TEACHER ATTITUDES AND SKILLS

The *Positive Discipline in the Classroom Facilitator's Guide* includes activities that help teachers *experience* the rationale for using a positive approach. During the activity called "Please Be Seated," participants form triads. In each triad, one person role-plays a student sitting in a chair. The other two role-play adults who stand behind the chair with their hands on the student's shoulders. The object is for the student to try to get out of the chair, while the adults keep him or her in the chair. While processing this activity by asking each person what they were thinking, feeling, or deciding to do in the future, all the issues and short- and long-range results of control are discussed. Those playing students share their feelings of anger, re-

sentment, or complete discouragement. They also share their decisions to spend all their time figuring out how to defeat the controlling adult, get even, or (even worse) give up and conform, with great loss to their personal sense of value. Those playing adults share how they feel out of control even though they are acting controlling. Some discuss how easy it is to get into the power struggle without considering the long-range results. All they can think about is winning or not being defeated. No one considers that even if they could win, the price would be making the student the loser.

We have discussed many of the skills students need to learn for successful class meetings. There are also several teacher skills that greatly enhance class meetings. It is most important to model what you are hoping the children will learn—mutual respect and cooperation. Teachers should model courtesy statements, such as please, thank you, you are welcome, and so on.

One of the most important skills that both models mutual respect and allows children to develop their capabilities is open-ended questioning. Any statement you might like to make can be put in the form of a question. If you want to let children know you think they are being too noisy, ask, "How many think it is getting too noisy in here?" It is especially effective if you ask the question both ways. If you ask how many think it is okay, also ask how many think it is not okay. The less you let your own biases show, the more you allow children to think. It is amazing how often children come up with the same kind of lecturing and moralizing statements they reject when they are spoken by an adult.

Open-ended questions can change an atmosphere from negative to positive, as in the following example:

A teacher requested help with a student who was causing a great deal of trouble on the playground. The counselor felt the best way to handle the problem was through a class meeting.

This teacher had never held a class meeting, so the counselor used this opportunity to demonstrate.

She asked Billy to leave the classroom. The general rule is that you do not discuss a child who is not there, but in this case she knew that a positive atmosphere had not been created, and she did not want to take the chance that Billy would be hurt by the comments. The class meeting was started by asking who was the biggest troublemaker in the class. The students all chorused, "Billy." They were then asked what kind of things Billy did to cause trouble. They mentioned fighting, stealing balls, swearing, calling names, and so on. These first questions allowed the children to express what they had been thinking and feeling.

The next questions allowed the children an opportunity to think and feel in a positive direction. First, "Why do you think Billy does these things?"

The answers included such things as "Because he is mean." "He is a bully." Finally one student said, "Maybe it is because he doesn't have any friends." Another student chimed in that Billy was a foster child.

When the children were asked to discuss what it means to be a foster child, they offered such ideas as how hard it must be to leave your family, move so much, and so forth. They were now expressing understanding for Billy, instead of hostility.

Everyone in the class raised his or her hand when asked, "How many of you would be willing to help Billy?" A list was made on the board of all their suggestions of what they could do to help. These included walking to and from school with Billy, playing with him during recess, and eating lunch with him. Specific volunteers were then listed after each suggestion.

Later, Billy was told the class had discussed the problems he had been having on the playground. When he was asked if he had any idea how many of the students wanted to help him, he looked at the ground and replied, "Probably none of

them." When he was told that every one of the students wanted to help him, he looked up with wide eyes and asked as though he couldn't believe it, "Every one?"

When the whole class decided to help Billy, and followed through on their commitments, he felt such a sense of belonging that his behavior improved dramatically.

Another skill is to be willing to take ownership for some problems you have been trying to lay on the children. A seventh-grade teacher shared her experience with toothpick chewing. It drove her crazy, because not only did she think it looked disgusting, but she found toothpicks lying all over the classroom and school grounds. It was a problem for her, but not for her students. She had lectured and implored the students many times to please stop chewing toothpicks. Nothing happened.

Finally she put it on the agenda, and admitted she could understand it was not a problem for them, but she would appreciate it if they would help her with a solution to her problem. Because they had only fifty minutes for class, they could not spend more than ten minutes a day for a class meeting, so quite often they didn't come up with a final solution to a problem for several days. On the third day of discussing toothpicks, one of the students asked the teacher if she had seen anyone chewing toothpicks lately. She realized—and admitted—that she hadn't. This student observed that maybe the problem had been solved. The teacher said with surprise, "Maybe it has."

This is an excellent example of how, many times, just discussing a problem is enough to make everyone aware of it and to help them work toward solutions outside the class meeting setting.

Be as nonjudgmental as possible. When students feel they can discuss anything without being judged, they will bring many things out in the open for discussion and learning. One teacher expressed concern that if she talked about some things, such as spitting in the bathroom, it might give other students

ideas they hadn't thought of before. As we talked, she realized that the students knew what was going on, and that not talking about it openly would not make it go away.

Do not censor agenda items. Some adults want to censor items on the agenda that they consider "tattletale" items. What may seem like a tattletale item to you is a real concern to the child. Other adults want to eliminate items if a similar problem has been discussed before. Again, it may be similar to you, but unique to the child. The important thing to remember is that the process is even more important than the solutions. Even if the item seems the same to you, the children may solve it differently or more quickly because of their past experience with the process.

Finally, it is important to be able to find the positive intent behind every behavior. This enables children to feel validated and valued, an essential prerequisite to changing behavior. During one class meeting, the students were discussing a problem of cheating. The girl whose problem it was explained that she had looked at the words before her spelling test because she wanted to pass the test. Mr. Meder asked, "How many think it is really great that people want to pass their tests?" Most of the class raised their hands. Another boy admitted that he had been caught cheating and had had to take a test over again. Mr. Meder asked, "Did it help you out?" The boy said yes. These are two examples of finding the positive in what could be seen only as negative. They did not leave it at that. The class went on to make suggestions for improving the behavior.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Question: Don't children need immediate solutions to their problems? I don't think my students could wait three days for their problems to come up on the agenda.