

Article By **Charles Silberman**. Email Charles at [charles.silberman@pgcps.org](mailto:charles.silberman@pgcps.org) to ask additional questions. Published on PE Central: 9-7-2010

Question: I am having a horrible time teaching my students the meaning of respect. Can you help? –Disrespected--

**Answer:**

Dear Disrespected,

I can truly empathize with your situation, especially at the start of the year. It often feels like the start of the year is spent teaching students how to speak nicely to one another and to listen more than it is about teaching actual curricular content. Please do not take it personally and internalize that you deserve to be treated this way. I believe that there are several strategies that you can use to help yourself in this situation.

Before I delve into suggestions for handling disrespect, let's define it and try to understand where it stems from. This will help us have a better basis from which to try and change the behaviors. The website <http://www.freedictionary.com> defines disrespect as, "a complex mental state involving beliefs and feelings and values and dispositions to act in certain ways." This means that people who display disrespectful behavior are acting from a value or belief system where disrespect holds worth. There may be several reasons why this core belief system exists. Once you understand where the value system stems from, you can more aptly address the issue purposefully.

The following are reasons for students to act disrespectfully:

- Negative peer pressure that encourages that support system
- Home environment that supports and teaches that value system
- A culture or sub-culture the person comes from that supports that belief system
- An errand thought process that leads the person to support that belief system
- A past negative experience that forced the person to develop that attitude such as bad experience with teachers, a childhood trauma, or some other event where the person internalized disrespect as a coping mechanism for interacting with the world
- A negative reaction to something the teacher does or says that reminds them of a negative adult or situation in their lives
- A learned response to having been yelled at by other teachers or adults (-

- A lowered school expectation for behavior with no consequences
- The person in the position before you allowed that behavior as an expectation
- The students are testing to see what they can get away with
- Low self esteem
- Lack of knowledge of the subject matter

These are just a handful of reasons I have come across or heard about that have resulted in students acting disrespectful. As you can see, when students act disrespectful it is not always such a simple expectation. So, you may have to do some digging on an individual or class basis as to why this is going on in order to get a better read on how to solve it.

Once you gain a better understanding, here are some suggestions on how to work with issues of disrespect.

**Teach Them Otherwise** - Our job is to teach. As physical education teachers, we have a wonderful opportunity to use sport as a way to teach character and build students' esteem. I would make your next unit specifically character-based using sports as the venue or start to implement a character-based behavior system into your teaching. Three examples of these suggestions are described below.

The first is the game of Cricket. Yes, cricket! In cricket, disrespect is not allowed. If a player looks at the umpire the wrong way, he can be suspended for multiple games without pay. Because around 80% of our communication is non-verbal, and a majority of students display disrespect with body posturing, I love using Cricket to highlight the importance of non-verbal communication and express that there are consequences for all disrespectful actions. In addition, teaching a new and foreign sport allows students to learn about another culture and how others may view our students character traits such as disrespect. This, then, becomes a launching board for discussing character more in detail and also acts as a mirror where students can see how their value system looks to others. Once they see this, they begin to internalize the notion that others receive poor principles negatively and that they might need to change their value system if they want to operate in the outside world. There is an organization that can aid you if you are unfamiliar with how to teach Cricket and don't have the equipment. The Maryland Youth Cricket Association comes out to schools to teach Cricket to children and donates equipment so they can play the game after this visit. Visit

<http://www.marylandyouthcricket.org> or email [mdyouthcricket@gmail.com](mailto:mdyouthcricket@gmail.com) for more information. Of course, you can use any foreign game to teach character, as well. Cricket worked for me, but something else might work better for you.

The second example of teaching character is through using materials from a website like <http://charactercounts.org/> or your school guidance counselor. I use Character Counts materials to teach a character unit. I cover one topic per class. The lesson starts with a definition of our trait for that day, followed by some games and discussion that emphasize the trait. One example activity has the students standing in two circles. One circle is on the inside and the other is on the outside. Students stand in the circles and face each other. Students on the inside circle step up to students on the outside circle and say something nice to them. They then step back and move one person to the left. They step up to that person and say something nice to them. This continues until the students get back to the person they started with. Next, the outside circle completes the same process. This game teaches students how it feels to say something nice to someone else and how it feels to receive a compliment. It also teaches them that the expectation for the class is politeness among other implicit lessons you can choose to draw out of it. In addition to activities, assessments are given. From past experience, the children responded very well to this initiative, and as a result of the unit, I saw a gain in more positive social interaction.

The third example is simpler. I observed a teacher once who used wristbands of different colors. Each wristband represented a character trait. Each day he would wear a different color wristband, and that was the trait he was looking for the children to display on that day. He had a system set up around this that included recognition for displaying the day's character trait. Over time, he got more positive behavior and social interaction.

**Be The Model/Set the Expectation/Have Discussions** – We are role models to students. Therefore, what we model, students will follow. Display the behavior you want and set expectations that students will display the same behavior. Students generally rise to the level of expectation we set and display. Some actionable examples of this include thanking students, complementing them on positive attitudes, showing appreciation for hard work, and just being the kind and caring person you would want them to become. If the students are not meeting your expectations, then have discussions with them about why it is important to behave a certain way. Use the discussions to get across the

expectations you want. After a while, most students will start to get your message.

When I give character speeches I like to highlight a few things:

- What are real world reasons the children can relate to that would help them see the importance of showing respect of good character
- Respect is a two way street, and you have to earn it to get it
- Their job in school is to learn, and no one has the right to be disrespectful and stop others from learning
- The students are responsible for their actions, and every action has a consequence
- That the long-term goal is to teach students to make good decisions in life, and that starts with attitude and choosing to control their behavior

I am confident that you will find other areas to highlight in your discussions. These are just suggestions, not a script.

**Have a Plan** – Come up with a plan for how you are going to react in certain situations so when things happen, you are prepared. Also, come up with a plan for how you are going to discipline students who are not getting on board after you have tried some of the steps above. Remember, you have to discuss, teach, and clarify your expectations before you can fairly start to implement them. So, have a plan including consequences for disrespectful students, provide consequences that are fair for the level of disrespect you experience, and stick to your plan.

**Be Realistic/ Collaborate** – There is no way we are going to change children overnight who have had a disrespectful value system ingrained in them for years. Remember to be realistic. If, on a scale of -5 to +5, with +5 being extremely disrespectful, your students are at a -5, getting them to 0 or neutral on the scale is significant progress!

In addition to being realistic, remember that we do not teach in a vacuum. Use your school team and resources to help. As I mentioned earlier, students come with varying reasons that drive their behavior. You may need to involve administration, guidance, parents, and other professionals to make change happen.

I commend you on not accepting disrespect as the status quo. With some insight into your students' lives, some hard work on your part, and a team effort, you will make a difference greater than your imagination can hold.

Email me at [charles.silberman@pgcps.org](mailto:charles.silberman@pgcps.org) to ask your question!