

High Impact, Low Risk: Ten Strategies to Teach Responsibility

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The idea of teaching responsibility through physical education has recently received a resurgence of importance. For some (Hellison, 1995), this calls for a total curriculum focused on personal and social responsibility goals through physical activity. For others (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 1998), it is one aspect of teaching fitness and motor skills. Regardless of the perspective, there are many subtle, non-invasive techniques to gradually teach students to be responsible for their own interests and conduct.

Initially, ideas about teaching responsibility may seem scary because they necessitate a relinquishing of control to students (one must experience responsibility to become responsible), but it is comforting to start with the basics. The following ideas are designed for easy implementation by teachers who are beginning to focus on aspects of responsibility.

The ten strategies listed here are relatively low-risk for teachers and high-impact for students. They aim to put into action, in a variety of ways, the constructs of responsibility for students in the physical education setting.

1. Design a hall pass similar to the key tags used at gas stations for restroom use during class. Hang two tags (one for girls and the other for boys) on the gymnasium wall close to the door. When students need to use the restroom, they simply take the appropriate "key" and replace it when they return. If a tag is present, the student is free to use the restroom; if not, he or she must wait until the tag is re-

turned. The idea here is that students are capable of knowing when they need to use the restroom. If this freedom is abused, the teacher can then discuss the implications and repercussions of the abuse. A "teachable moment" on responsible and irresponsible behavior can be interjected.

2. Allow students to drink water whenever they see fit during class. As with restroom use, thirst is a basic human function. Even very young students know when they need to consume water. If the water fountain is in the gymnasium, the rule might be that only one person at a time can drink (or no one waiting in line). If the drinking fountain is outside of the gym, then a hall pass similar to the restroom pass could be used.

3. Spread equipment along the edges of the play area and have students pick it up instead of handing it out. Make sure there is enough for all students. When given a signal, the students walk and pick up equipment and carry it back to their space. The key here is to provide guidelines about how the equipment is to be retrieved; otherwise, students tend to run, push, and argue.

4. Post the initial class activity and have students begin practicing on their own. Posting the initial activity provides for all kinds of responsibility and frees the teacher to deal with all the other things that invariably happen at the beginning of class. Place the poster in a location where all students can see it and where it won't cause a traffic jam. Make sure the writing is legible and at the appropriate reading level

(with younger or ESL children, we have often had a skilled or bilingual reader stay near the poster to help). Also, make the tasks clear and not finite. For example, the task of dribbling a basketball 50 times allows some students to finish while others are working and may cause class management problems. On the other hand, a task like "Warm-up by practicing dribbling with your dominant and non-dominant hand while stationary until you hear the signal to stop" provides for an on-going task. Finally, it is helpful, but not necessary, if the task asks students to practice a skill that they have already learned. Exploring new activities is possible, but has a higher probability that students will need teacher assistance to complete the task.

5. Allow students to adjust tasks to fit their needs. This idea moves the concept of responsibility into the instructional realm. There are many ways to allow students to adjust tasks to their own needs, each giving the students a little more responsibility and relinquishing some of yours. Some ways that students are able to adjust the task include choice in size or type of equipment used, the spatial arrangements of a task, the complexity of a task, or the competitive focus of a task. For example, when working with throwing and catching, students can choose between using a beanbag, yarnball, or small rubber ball. When practicing a volleyball forearm pass, they can either toss the ball to each other or continually hit it back and forth. In either situation, they could also choose the distance between part-

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 ners. Game play can be structured so that three games occur simultaneously: a competitive, highly skilled game, a medium-intensity or practice-oriented game, and a game that is recreational or cooperative in nature.

6. Insert peer-teaching opportunities into lessons. Peers can provide feedback or teach their classmates new skills. Students love to teach one another—even younger ones are capable of doing this. Successful peer-teaching requires that the skill being taught is simple, that the cues for observation are very clear, and that the performance is easily measured. An easy peer-teaching task might involve students coaching one another on a basketball jump shot. Students could practice the shot in pairs. The coach would look to see whether the shooter had his or her elbow in and hand behind the ball and followed through with a “goose-neck.” The coach would then provide feedback to the shooter about each of these cues or coaching points.

7. Include peer assessment strategies in your lessons. Students are quite capable observers when provided with clear points to look for. In pairs or small groups, peers can use preprinted index cards or posters to assess the skills of others. The example in figure 1 shows an index card used with fifth and sixth graders to assess cuts and pivots in basketball. The task for this assessment was set up so that the students, using a cone as a defensive player, demonstrated to their partner their ability to cut and pivot. The partner checked off the extent to which the skills were done. Students had multiple options to show their use of the skill and the partners could provide feedback. As with peer teaching, the skills need to be simple and the cues easily observable.

8. Have students reflect on their work, behaviors, and attitudes (figure 2). This is a way they can discover what they really do in class, and it encourages them to begin to take responsibility for themselves. Reflection can be done using checklists of desirable class outcomes or exit slips that ask them to reflect on behavior, atti-

tudes, and learning. For some teachers, the logistical problems of using journals seem to outweigh the benefits. For a more complete discussion of journals in class, see Cutforth and Parker (1995) or Graham, Holt/Hale, and Parker (1998).

9. Make time-out a student decision. Hellison (1995) calls this progressive sit-out. This strategy is essentially the three-strike option, but it works a little differently. The first time a teacher needs to speak to a student regarding behavior, he or she asks the student whether a time-out is needed. At this point, the child decides whether or not to take a time-out. The second time the teacher needs to speak to the student during a lesson, the teacher asks the student to take a time-out, but the student can return to the lesson anytime he or she feels ready. When ready, the student simply re-enters the lesson. If there is a third incident within the same class period, the teacher then asks the student to remain out until the teacher and student can develop a plan to help the student to participate appropriately in class. Most children know when they need to “take a break” from the activ-

ity and will do so if given the option. This option places the burden of responsibility on the student and frees the teacher from trying to guess when a child is ready to return to the activity. Remember, as with the traditional time-out, for this strategy to be effective the student must find the activity attractive. Otherwise, it is a reward to go to time-out.

10. Have students perform small service projects. It is amazing how eager students are to help others. There are always projects to be done to help clean up the schoolyard or the equipment room. Students can also volunteer time on weekends and after school to help clean city parks, set up chairs for family suppers, and for other projects. The key here is for the students to choose projects that benefit others and to do so without the bribe of a reward; they do it to help others.

Implementing the Strategies

Each of these strategies, just like motor skills, must be taught. They are skills we usually don't think about teaching (or aren't sure how to teach). Responsibility skills are learned, and what is learned must be taught. For

example, when teaching the class to begin by reading a posted activity, it is initially beneficial for the teacher to explain to the class what will happen, read the activity together with them, allow time for questions, and have them go practice, prompting them if they seem to drift. In the subsequent lesson, the teacher can stand by the sign and remind them to read it and begin, and then prompt them toward appropriate behavior. At the same time, the exit slip for the day might ask questions about how they worked when doing the initial activity. In the days that follow, the teacher can gradually reduce his or her overt presence with the posting as children acquire the skills.

Hellison and Kallusky (under review) offer ideas for adopting an approach where teaching in physical education emphasizes student responsibility. First of all, the teacher must believe to some degree that helping children to take responsibility is a

needed, legitimate purpose for teaching physical education. It is our impression that some of what you teach well is also what you tend to value. This suggests that teachers should begin the process of teaching responsibility by clarifying their own values. Do you trust children to take responsibility for themselves and their learning? Are you willing to relinquish some control of the classroom to the students?

If, after reflection, you do want to pursue this approach to teaching, start small. Try it out in one or two classes. Judge whether or not it is working. Keep track of the students' accomplishments (and failures), as well your own. If you notice changes in students' actions and behaviors, consider whether they are attributable to your new teaching techniques, and then make any necessary adjustments. Just don't stop! Outlast the problems you encounter. You can capitalize on these problems for the sake of student learn-

ing. Use them as teachable moments to help kids take more responsibility in and out of the gymnasium. Remember, problems don't mean that you take responsibility back; rather, you should figure out another way to teach so they do not recur.

As students become increasingly more responsible for their own thoughts and behavior, classroom management activities by the teacher become minuscule. Class seems to take care of itself, and you are allowed to fully enjoy the wonders of teaching and learning.

By not using strategies as these, we actually inhibit the development of responsibility in kids. We are subtly telling them that they are not capable of thinking on their own, of making some of life's basic decisions, or of knowing what is best for their own learning.

The message is subtle, but quite powerful.

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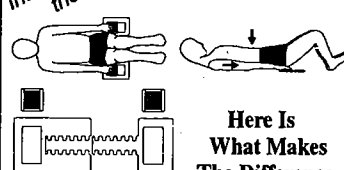


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