How teachers can bring out
the best in their students.

What Every TEACHER Should Know

by Dr. Thomas Gordon
with Noel Burch

TEACHING THAT WORKS AND TEACHING THAT FAILS

Teaching is a universal pursuit—everybody does it. Parents teach their children, employers teach their employees, coaches teach their players, wives teach their husbands (and vice versa), and of course professional teachers teach their students. Adults spend an amazing amount of time teaching young people. Some of that time is richly rewarding because helping kids of whatever age learn new skills or acquire new insights is a joyous experience. It makes one feel good, as a parent, a teacher or youth leader, to contribute to the growth of a child, to give something of oneself to enrich the life of another human being. It is exhilarating to watch a young person take from a teaching relationship something new that will expand understanding of the world or add to his or her repertoire of skills.

But as everybody knows, teaching young people can also be terribly frustrating and fraught with disappointment. All too often, parents, teachers, and youth workers discover to their dismay that their enthusiastic desire to teach something worthwhile to young people somehow fails to engender an enthusiastic desire in their students to learn it. Instead, they encounter stubborn resistance, low motivation, short attention spans, inexplicable disinterest, and often open hostility.

When young people, seemingly without reason, refuse to learn what adults are so unselfishly and altruistically willing to teach them, teaching is anything but exhilarating. In fact**,** it can be a miserable experience leading to feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, sheer exasperation—and, too frequently, deep resentment toward the unwilling and ungrateful learner.

What makes the difference between teaching that works and teaching that fails, teaching that brings rewards and teaching that causes pain? Certainly, many different factors influence the outcome of one's efforts to teach another. But one factor contributes the most—namely, the degree of effectiveness of the teacher in establishing a particular kind of relationship with students.

It is the quality of the teacher-learner relationship that is crucial. More crucial, in fact, than what the teacher is teaching, how the teacher does it, or whom the teacher is trying to teach.

What teachers or parents should be teaching children and youth is an issue that must be left to others far more experienced in designing curricula, formulating educational objectives, and making value judgments about what is important for young people to learn—at home and in school. In fact, opinions on such matters will vary from home to home, from school to school, and from one type of community to another.

If the relationship is of a high quality, a teacher will be effective in teaching anything—any kind of subject matter, any content, any skills, any values

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or beliefs. History, math, literature, computer skills or chemistry—all can be made interesting and exciting to young people by a teacher who has learned how to create a relationship with students in which the needs of the teacher are respected by the students and the needs of the students are respected by the teacher.

Face it: even art, tennis, gymnastics, sculpture, or sex education can be taught so that students are bored, turned off and stubbornly resistant to learning—if the teacher fosters relationships that make students feel put down, distrusted, misunderstood, pushed around, humiliated, or critically evaluated.

In most schools a very high percentage of time that could be teaching-learning time is taken up with student problems that teachers are rarely trained to help solve or teacher problems created by reactive or rebellious students whom teachers cannot control.

Our goal is to offer teachers some skills they can use to enlarge the teaching-learning time.

COMMUNICATION: THE LINK BETWEEN TEACHER AND LEARNER

It is essential to zero in on the fact that teaching and learning are really two different functions—two separate and distinct processes. Not the least of the many differences between teaching and learning is that the process of teaching is carried out by one person while the process of learning goes on inside another. Obvious? Of course. But worth thinking about. Because if teaching-learning processes are to work effectively, a unique kind of relationship must exist between these two separate organisms—some kind of a connection, link, or bridge between the teacher and the learner.

It takes communication *skills* for teachers to become effective in making those connections, creating those links, and building those bridges. These essential communication skills actually are not very complex—certainly not hard for any teacher to understand—although they require practice like any other skill, such as singing, skiing, writing, or playing a musical instrument. Nor do these critical communication skills place unusual demands on teachers to absorb vast amounts of knowledge about the "philosophy of education," "instructional methodologies," or "principles of child development." On the contrary, these essential skills primarily involve talking—something most of us do very easily. Since talk can be destructive to human relationships as well as enhancing, talk can separate the teacher from students or move them closer together. Again, obvious. But again, worth further thought. For the particular effect that talk produces depends on the *quality* of the talk and

on the teacher's selection of the *most appropriate kind of talk* for different kinds of situations.

Teacher effectiveness requires an additional set of skills, an extra sensitivity, an extra accomplishment—namely, the ability to foster two-way communication.

TESTED SKILLS, NOT VAGUE ABSTRACTIONS

Hundreds of thousands of teachers throughout the United States and in many countries around the world have learned these communication skills and methods in our program called Teacher Effectiveness Training (T.E.T.). This program focuses on practical things that teachers can say and do everyday in the classroom, not on abstract educational concepts.

Experience with teachers in T.E.T. classes has made us somewhat critical of the formal education of most teachers; it seems to familiarize them with terms, ideas, and concepts without providing them with practical ways to put these abstractions to work in the classroom. We are talking about such concepts as "respect for the needs of students," "affective education," "classroom climate," "freedom to learn," "humanistic

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education," "the teacher as a resource person," "two-way communication," and the like.

In T.E.T. such ideas and concepts are given operational definitions—they are defined in terms of specific operations, things teachers actually can do, specific messages they can communicate.

SKILLS FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT

Take for example a concept most teachers have heard over and over again in their training—"respect for the needs of the student." Yet many teachers don't know what specific operations they can perform that would show respect for the needs of students. It becomes eminently clear, however, how they can make that concept real when they learn about Method III, the No-Lose Method of resolving conflicts between teachers and students. Method III is a six-step process: Teacher and students problem-solve until they come up with a solution that permits the teacher's needs to be met (respected) and the students' needs to be met (respected), too.

Method III offers teachers a specific tool they can use every day for insuring that their students' needs are respected without teachers paying the price of having their own needs frustrated. In T.E.T., respect for students' needs becomes something more than an abstraction for teachers—they actually learn how to bring it off.

The same is true with the concept of "democracy in the classroom." T.E.T. shows teachers the skills and procedures required to create a living democracy through the classroom rule-setting meeting in which all members of the class, including the teacher, participate in determining the rules everyone will be expected to follow. T.E.T. also offers teachers workable alternatives to the traditional use of power and authority (which is, of course, the antithesis of democratic relationships).

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For example, in many elementary school classrooms students work in small groups or on individual projects while the teacher works with another group or person. In the course of getting jobs done, work completed, individuals and groups conflict with each other. Students working on an art project make too much noise for another group to concentrate on a reading assignment. The teacher is distracted by the movement of students as they get materials and books from storage areas.

Teachers trained in Method III see these situations as opportunities to teach democratic living, view them not as strife to be avoided, but as problems to be solved. A Method III scenario might go something like this:

Teacher: (loudly) Hey class! I would like you to stop whatever you are doing right now. I'm having a problem hearing in my group and I notice that some of you are yelling at each other to quiet down. I can't teach the way things are going and I am guessing you're getting upset too.

Danny: Yeah! How can we get our reading done when they (points at the art group) keep talking and making all that noise?

Maria: Well, what are we supposed to do? If we can't talk about the project how are we supposed to finish it?

Julian: And Lori keeps bumping into my desk when she gets the stuff out of the science cupboard.

Kyle: (to teacher) I have to go almost right through your group to shelve the library books, then you stare at me like I was doing something wrong.

Teacher: You feel kind of trapped, is that it Kyle?

Kyle: Yeah, and if I do my job you glare at me.

Teacher: Well, it looks to me as if our problem is that we are all getting in each other's way without intending to. It seems to me that we might rearrange the room or change things around to keep that from

happening. Do you guys have any ideas about that?

Katie: Well, the art group has to work by the sink, but we could put those library books back here on these shelves or you could move your group to that table on the side.

Teresa: …and we could move the science stuff to that other side where nobody sits. It's too hard to get out of here (points to present location) anyway.

Teacher: Let me write these ideas down on the board so we don't forget them later.

Several other ideas then emerge from the teacher and group about how they could change their classroom environment to eliminate the most pressing problems.

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Teacher: Wow…we came up with a lot of ideas for change, didn't we? Are there any of these ideas that you don't think will work?

A few are crossed off as conflicting with others or not practical.

Teacher: I like all of these ideas and I'm ready to try them. What about you all?

Class: (agrees)

All of the tasks are assigned and the rearrangement proceeds immediately.

Teacher: Now that we have changed things around, let's see if we can get our work done without all the trouble we had before. If we need to we can make some more changes. I think I can do my job now and I feel good about our problem-solving. I appreciate your cooperation and ideas.

SKILLS THAT HELP STUDENTS GROW

Student "growth and development" are goals to which all schools and all teachers wholeheartedly subscribe. Yet the teaching methods used by most teachers and sanctioned by most school administrators all but insure that students will remain dependent. Instead of fostering the growth of *responsibility,* teachers and administrators dictate and control students of all ages as if they were not to be trusted to take responsibility for themselves. Instead of encouraging independence, schools actually reinforce students' dependence on their teachers—for determining what they should learn, how they should learn it, when they should learn it, and, of course, how well they learn it.

It's not that teachers want students who are dependent. It's more that they have not been taught the skills and methods by which a person in his or her relationship with others, can foster self-direction, self-responsibility, self-determination, self-control and self- evaluation. Such qualities are not developed accidentally; they must be nurtured and deliberately fostered by parents and teachers.

In T.E.T. we show what can be done to make growth and development happen, rather than remain an empty ideal. For example, teachers can learn how to use Active Listening, a counseling skill that will greatly increase their effectiveness in helping students with problems that interfere with learning. But this help is given in a way that enables *the student to find his or her own solution,* as opposed to being given solutions or suggestions—the typical way most teachers respond to student problems. When students are allowed to keep the responsibility for solving their problems, the outcome is an increment of growth toward self-responsibility and self-confidence.

In the following meeting between a student and her teacher, note how the teacher skillfully kept responsibility with the student by using Active Listening—a way of responding in which the listener feeds back or "reflects back" messages of the sender. The class had been studying terrorism, and the student had been given an assignment to write a theme on any aspect of it.

Student: I came in to see you to get your ideas about what I should write about in my paper.

Teacher: You're uncertain about what topic to choose, is that right?

Student: Yeah. I've been stressed out about this for days, but I still haven't come up with anything. I knew you'd have an idea.

Teacher: You've really struggled with this, but no progress yet.

Student: What have other students written on that made a really good theme?

Teacher: You want a topic that would make an exceptionally good theme, right?

Student: Yeah. I just have to get an "A" on this paper so that I get an "A" in the course.

Teacher: It sounds like you're feeling some strong pressures to get an "A" in this course.

Student: I'll say! My parents would really be upset if I didn't. They always want me to do as well as my older sister. She's really a brain.

Teacher: You feel they expect you to be just as good as your sister in school.

Student: Yeah. But I'm not like her. I have other interests. I wish my parents would accept me for what I am—I'm different from Rachel. All she ever does is study.

Teacher: You feel you're a different kind of person than your sister and you wish your parents recognized that.

Student: You know, I've never told them how I feel. I think I will now. Maybe they'll stop pushing me so hard to be a straight-A student.

Teacher: You're thinking maybe you should tell them how you feel.

Student: I can't lose. And maybe it'd help.

Teacher: Everything to gain, nothing to lose.

Student: Right. If they stopped pushing me, I wouldn't have to worry so much about my grades. I might even learn more.

Teacher: You might get even more out of school.

Student: Yeah. Then I could write a paper on something I'm interested in. Thanks for helping me out.

Teacher: Any time.

By refraining from giving this troubled student a solution to her problem (suggesting a topic or giving advice), this teacher employed one of the T.E.T. skills—Active Listening. The result was that the student got down to the deeper problem (parental pressure) and eventually came up with her own strategy for trying to solve it. In this brief interaction, the teacher contributed far more significantly to the growth of this student than if she had not used the Active Listening skill.

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Research—literally volumes of it—has shown how critical listening is in facilitating learning. Here again, every parent and teacher, with a few unfortunate exceptions, is biologically equipped to listen and well practiced in the act of listening to what kids communicate. They do it every day. Yet what they think they hear is not necessarily what the learner is trying to communicate. Active Listening is a simple method by which you can check on the accuracy of your listening to make sure that what you hear is what the student really meant. At the same time, it will prove to the student that you have not only heard him or her but have understood.

SKILLS THAT HELP STUDENTS RESPECT YOUR RIGHTS

Parenthetically, there are times when it is very inappropriate to listen to kids. When you are teaching them something in the classroom or at home and you find their behavior disruptive or unacceptable, the hackneyed advice, "Be a good listener," should be ignored. At such times you must send your own strong message instead, confronting the students with how they are interfering with your rights. There is a way, however, for you to send such a message with little risk of their feeling squelched, put down, or even defensive.

The very term "confronting" often has a negative connotation since it is usually associated with the kinds of messages that, in some way, denigrate the receiver. In Teacher Effectiveness Training we call these messages You-Messages since they invariably contain information about the person being confronted.

Teachers learn a way of talking to students that has a much greater probability of getting them to change the objectionable behavior and at the same time preserve or enhance self-esteem while maintaining a healthy relationship. These messages are called I-Messages and contain information about the teacher (sender) rather than the student (receiver).

Here are two situations with examples of typical You- Messages and the more effective I-Messages:

Situation I: John and Leo are talking loudly enough to interrupt the teacher's concentration.

You-Message: Leo! You and John lower your voices!

I-Message: Leo, when you and John talk that loudly I get distracted and lose my concentration.

Situation II: Monica is repeatedly late to class.

You-Message: At your age, Monica, you should be able to take more responsibility for yourself.

I-Message: When you're late to class I have to stop what I am doing and correct the absence report and I'm getting irritated about it.

ONE PHILOSOPHY FOR ALL AGES AND TYPES OF STUDENTS

Most books about teaching imply that different skills, strategies, and methods are required for each of the various ages of students—as if a different pedagogy were required by teachers for each age bracket. Teaching preschoolers, it is said, is very different from teaching high school students or sixth graders, and so on. While it is true that the various developmental stages of children must be taken into consideration in determining materials and educational experiences, the basic human relationship between teacher and student remains the same.

The skills and methods in T.E.T. are equally useful and applicable for effective teaching of students of all ages, up to and including college students. Teachers need not learn one set of skills for preschoolers, another for elementary students, another for students in junior high school, etc.

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Our philosophy is that students of whatever age are human beings, and with their teachers they will develop human relationships, good or bad, depending on how they are treated by their teachers.

Similarly, we feel far too much emphasis has been placed on other differences among students—their color, their ethnic origins, their IQs, their abilities, and the social and economic status of their families. This universal practice of classifying, testing, evaluating, labeling, and stereotyping students seems not only unnecessary but harmful. It has brought into schools a way of thinking about students not unlike the way many physicians view their patients—e.g., my allergy patient, my heart problem, my ulcer patient. Too often schools see their students not as persons but as faceless cases: underachievers, gifted, culturally deprived, economically handicapped, high or low IQ, hyperactive, emotionally disturbed, high or low potential, and so on. The harmful effects of such diagnosing and subsequent grouping of students has been proven in a number of research studies. These clearly demonstrate that such groupings not only lower students' self-concepts but also bias teachers' expectations and hence lower the quality of instruction.

Actually, there are far more similarities than differences among students. All are human beings, first of all. All have human characteristics, human feelings, human responses. Teacher effectiveness can therefore be based on a general theory of human relationships. All kids get turned on when they are really learning, and get bored when they are not. All students feel discouraged when they are put down if they have done poorly or have failed. All kids develop self-defeating coping mechanisms to deal with teachers' use of power. All kids have a tendency to want to be dependent, yet struggle desperately for autonomy; all kids get angry and retaliative; all kids develop self-esteem when they achieve and lose it when they are told they don't

achieve enough; all kids value their needs and protect their civil rights.

The skills and methods in T.E.T. are designed for this homogeneity of students. This is why teachers find T.E.T. as useful for a child labeled "academically challenged" as for one labeled "gifted," for a student from a low-income family as for a one from a wealthy family, for an African American student as well as a Caucasian student. The Active Listening skill, for example, will work wonders with all kinds of kids because all kinds of kids need to be heard, understood, accepted. The I-Message technique for confronting students who are interfering with the teacher (or other students) will greatly reduce the defensiveness of all kinds of students, because all students defend themselves when attacked and put down.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE DISCIPLINE PROBLEM

No question about it, the issue of discipline is one that every teacher has to face.

Most new teachers hope they never will have to discipline, because they are certain that as teachers they are going to be so competent and stimulating that the need for discipline will seldom arise. Most experienced teachers have learned that while they must discipline, they actually find it odious, as well as inadequate. They want to teach, not discipline. As teachers, they want the supreme satisfaction of seeing their learners learn.

What goes wrong? Why do so many teachers spend so much of their teaching time trying to maintain discipline in the classroom? Our answer is that teachers, by and

large rely too heavily on threats of punishment, on actual punishment, or on verbal shaming and blaming. These methods simply do not work well. Repressive, power-based methods usually provoke resistance, rebellion, retaliation. Even when they do bring about a change in a student's behavior, the old behavior often recurs the minute the teacher leaves the room or goes to the board.

In T.E.T., teachers learn alternatives to power and authority—methods that actually give them more influence, not less. They learn how to conduct the rule-setting meeting in which they involve all the students in setting the class rules and regulations. One result of such meetings is that students are much more motivated to follow the rules because they see them as their rules, not just the teacher's. Another benefit from these rule-setting meetings is that teachers spend less time having to act as enforcers of rules.

When teachers become skilled in using non-power methods to achieve discipline and order, they find themselves using a whole new language in talking about discipline. The traditional language of power is replaced by the language of non-power. Teachers report a gradual reduction in their use of such terms as control, direct, punish, threaten, setting limits, policing, enforcing, laying down the law, being tough, reprimanding, scolding, ordering, demanding, and so on. Even the term "discipline" tends to drop out of their vocabulary.

In place of such terms, teachers begin using a new vocabulary—e.g., problem solving, conflict resolution, influencing, confronting, collaboration, cooperation, joint decision making, working out contracts with students,

obtaining mutual agreements, negotiating, meeting needs, working things out.

When teachers forego using power and authority, they cease using the language required to administer the old, ineffective type of discipline. They begin to use the words and terms of their other relationships, where non-power methods are absolutely necessary to make those relationships mutually satisfying, e.g., the husband-wife, friend-friend, colleague-colleague relationships. What teachers would ever speak of "disciplining" their spouses or friends? In their marriages or friendships, rarely would teachers even think, let alone speak, in such terms as giving orders, commanding, reprimanding, punishing, setting limits, making rules. The reason is obvious: Teachers know that power and authority inevitably destroy those relationships. Power and authority will just as surely destroy teachers' relationships with students.

HOW TO RESOLVE THE AUTHORITARIAN-PERMISSIVE CONTROVERSY

As most parents and teachers know, a controversy has been raging for years in school districts in every part of the country over whether schools should be strict or lenient, traditional or progressive, student-centered or teacher-centered, conservative or liberal, authoritarian or permissive. This pervasive controversy never seems to get resolved; it constantly emerges as a fundamental issue that polarizes parents, teachers, administrators, and the media. School board members run for office on platforms that proclaim either their conservative or their liberal stance toward schools. Candidates for state superintendent are often stereotyped

as right-wing or liberal. Parents fight in P.T.A. meetings over whether the schools are too permissive or too strict. Administrators admit being harassed by parents who feel they are too progressive as well as by parents who are as certain they are too conservative. Bond issues are won or lost over the issue of whether the school system is too far right or too far left of the majority values of the community—particularly when it comes to "authority versus freedom" in dealing with students.

T.E.T. cuts through this controversy. It exposes both of the two polar positions as destructive philosophies, not only in dealing with young people in schools but in all human relationships. Both postures, under whatever label, are "win-lose" approaches and power-based philosophies. Those who advocate strictness, strong authority and regimentation want adults to direct and control students by using the power and authority that adults possess. Those who advocate permissiveness and freedom for kids in the schools unwittingly are opting for conditions in which students are permitted to use their power and make life miserable for their teachers and administrators. Whichever one of these schools of thought prevails, somebody is bound to lose.

T.E.T. presents an alternative to the two win-lose philosophies. Teachers learn how to establish and maintain rules and order in the classroom *without using their power*. Teachers will also learn about the inevitable price they have to pay for being either permissive or strict—student-centered or teacher-centered. It is our hope that this No-Lose Method, which replaces conflicts in the classroom with cooperation and mutual respect, will finally help to end this unproductive controversy that has needlessly kept parents and school people at each other's throats for over a half century.
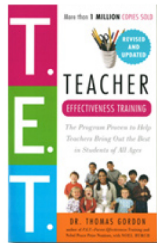
BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

Let us say it again: what goes on between teachers and students will be determined more by the quality of their relationships than by any other factor.

The challenge for teachers is to improve the quality of these relationships in order to bring out the best in the young people they teach.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT T.E.T.

1. Read the **Teacher Effectiveness Training (T.E.T.)** book to gain a deeper understanding of Dr. Gordon's model. It's available through our online store at www.gordontraining.com/store.

2. Request information on how the T.E.T. program and our conflict resolution programs for students can be made available at your school. Contact us at: schools@gordontraining.com.

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ABOUT GORDON TRAINING INTERNATIONAL

GTI is dedicated to teaching the essential skills people need to communicate effectively and to resolve conflicts so no one loses. This model has universal appeal—since 1962, over 7 ½ million people in 50 countries have learned the Gordon Model through our books and courses.

ABOUT OUR FOUNDER, DR. THOMAS GORDON

GTI was founded in 1962 by three-time Nobel Peace Prize Nominee and award-winning psychologist, Dr. Thomas Gordon. He was the best-selling author of eight books that include:

Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.)
Leader Effectiveness Training (L.E.T.)
Teacher Effectiveness Training (T.E.T.)
P.E.T. in Action
Sales Effectiveness Training
Discipline That Works
Making the Patient Your Partner
Good Relationships: What Makes Them, What Breaks Them

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