

Revisiting Ginott's Congruent Communication after Thirty Years

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Haim Ginott's theories of congruent communication received considerable attention during the 1970s. Although Ginott offered some excellent classroom management ideas, he never actually synthesized his work into a finely developed model. But Ginott's lack of a definitive model should not take away from the importance of his theories, which can contribute to positive classroom management and complement other classroom management models. In this article we revisit Ginott's congruent communication after thirty years and suggest that his theories continue to have relevance for middle and secondary school educators.

Congruent Communication: Basic Tenets

Ginott believed that the teacher's personal approach is the most influential element in creating the "climate" that contributes to children's behavior in the classroom, whether positive or negative (Ginott 1972a, 15). Students still accept responsibility for their behavior; the teacher, however, accepts responsibility for creating the climate for proper behavior. Ginott suggested that the following three basic tenets contribute to a positive class and school environment: (a) teachers demonstrate communication that is harmonious with students' feelings about themselves and their situations; (b) teachers demonstrate behaviors that invite and encourage student cooperation; and (c) teachers promote discipline as an alternative to punishment and believe that "the essence of discipline is finding effective alternatives to punishment" (Ginott 1972a, 147). The positive communication that results when teachers abide by these tenets is what Ginott referred to as "congruent communication," or "communication that is harmonious, authentic; where words fit feelings" (Ginott 1972a, 79).

Teachers' Roles

In addition to providing a classroom environment that invites cooperation and proper behavior, other selected teacher roles include emphasizing effective communication with students, avoiding autocratic behaviors, recognizing the need to seek alternatives to punishment; using "I" messages instead of "you" messages; conferring dignity on students; accepting and acknowledging children and their feelings; sending sane messages to students; and providing appreciative praise rather than evaluative praise. Teachers who want to promote cooperation with students and harmony in the classroom will probably be successful with Ginott's congruent communication; on the other hand, teachers who act autocratically, demand obedience and adherence to all expectations, and dish out harsh punishments will probably not feel comfortable working with Ginott's theories.

Practical Application

Explaining several of Ginott's ideas shows how teachers can proceed from theory to actual application and perhaps develop a more cohesive model, which Ginott's theory lacks.

Teachers should use clear communication. In Ginott's model, "communication is the key" (Morris 1996, 9). In the classroom, the communication is between the teacher and students, whereby the teacher clearly communicates expectations in a manner that allows students to feel accepted, even when they make a mistake or misbehave. By maintaining open communication, teachers help students learn more effectively and behave more appropriately. If teachers demonstrate understanding when a child makes a

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mistake, she or he will be more willing to keep learning (Morris 1996).

Teachers should use sane messages. Sane messages address the student's behavior rather than the student's character (Ginott 1973; Morris 1996). For example, Keith walks aimlessly around the room and disturbs the teacher and other students. The teacher sends a sane message by saying, "Keith, the other students and I are disturbed when someone walks around during quiet time," instead of "Keith, for the fifteenth time, you are walking around again—sit down." Because the teacher addresses the situation (the student's walking around the room), the child feels less threatened by the teacher and more willing to listen to the teacher's request. Also, the tone and sincerity of the teacher's voice contribute to the effectiveness of the sane message (Morris 1996).

Teachers should refrain from using punishment in handling discipline problems. Punishment interferes with the development of a child's conscience and often relieves guilt too easily. For example, children often feel that they have paid for their misbehavior and are then free to repeat it (Ginott 1965). Also, punishment rarely teaches discipline, because once the punishment is administered, the child tries only to avoid future punishment. Teachers should control their emotions when addressing a discipline problem and not let the problem become a "teacher versus student" situation (Morris 1996, 10). By finding means of teaching discipline other than using punishment, teachers can make discipline in the classroom a learning experience for all students (Morris 1996).

Teachers should ignore common four-letter words rather than make them an issue. Ginott (1972a) maintained that addressing the problem of bad language can be more troublesome than the language itself. He tells of a teacher who overheard a boy say a four-letter word. The teacher demanded that he repeat the word so she could be sure of what he said. The teacher then ordered the child to leave the room, and as the child left he said another four-letter word. All this time, the other children in the class watched to see what happened. Ginott maintained that a better approach would have been to ignore the word and not make it a major issue.

Teachers should use guidance rather than criticism to influence children. According to Ginott (1973), teachers who criticize often attack a child's personality and character, possibly calling him names and telling him where he will end up. In his book *Between Parent and Child* (1965), Ginott said that when teachers use criticism, it should always be constructively—for example, to point out what behavior needs to be improved. Also, teachers should entirely avoid negative remarks about a child's personality. When a student

knocked over someone else's books, instead of saying, "Pick up the books. Can't you be more careful? You disturbed half the class," the teacher said, "Perhaps you would like to help pick up the books." The teacher considered the incident an accident and avoided negative feelings.

Teachers should handle anger appropriately. Although most teachers assume that good teachers do not get angry, Ginott (1972b) maintained that even good teachers get angry at times. Still, he suggested that anger should be conveyed appropriately and identified three steps to surviving anger:

1. We accept the fact that children will make us angry.
2. We are entitled to our anger without guilt or shame.
3. Except for one safeguard, we are entitled to express what we feel. We can express our angry feelings *provided* (italics Ginott's) we do not attack the child's personality or character (Ginott 1965, 50–51).

Instead of speaking louder to convey anger, teachers should let their feelings be known with "I" messages. Ginott (1965) suggested statements such as "I feel annoyed" (51), "I feel irritated" (51), and even "I feel angry" (51). Sometimes just the statement that one is angry will be sufficient to stop the child from demonstrating the behavior.

Teachers should show acceptance and acknowledgment. When making demands on children, an uncritical message invites cooperation, while a critical message engenders resistance. For example, when a child interrupts a teacher, an uncritical message is, "I would like to finish my statement" (95), while a critical message is, "You are very rude. You are interrupting" (95).

Other examples might include the student who thinks there is too much homework. An uncritical message might be, "You seem upset about the homework. It does seem like a lot of work for one day, especially with this unexpected school assignment." A critical message would be, "When I was your age we had ten times as much homework. And as for the assignment, you have only yourself to blame. If you had finished it in class, you wouldn't have to do it at home. So stop complaining and start working . . ." (Ginott 1965, 99)

Teachers should avoid name-calling and labeling students and providing "diagnosis and prognosis" (Ginott 1972a, 100). Ginott emphatically stated that teachers should not call students names under any circumstances. The psychological results of such actions are devastating, and they usually do not change negative behaviors. Although the dangers of name-calling should be clear to perceptive teachers, one physical education coach

called his well-behaved but less-capable boys derogatory names but did not seem to realize that his words were hurtful until another teacher called the habit to his attention.

Ginott (1972) told the story of a teacher disciplining Simon for being late to school. "What's your excuse this time?" Simon told his story. The teacher answered, "I don't believe a word you said. I know why you are late. You are too lazy to get up on time. I still remember your brother; he too suffered from congenital indolence. If you don't shape up, you know where you'll end up" (Ginott 1972, 99).

Teachers should avoid sarcasm and ridicule. A teacher said to a student, "You don't bring your books to class; you don't do any work. Why do you come to school anyway? Just to sleep and get lunch?" To make matters worse, the teacher made this statement in front of the entire class. The sixth grade boy just sat there and endured the teacher's ridicule. Ginott (1972) summed up his position on sarcasm: "Sarcasm is not good for children. It destroys their self-confidence and self-esteem. Like strychnine, it can be fatal. Bitter irony and biting sarcasm only reinforce the traits they attack" (66). Ginott (1972) gave examples of caustic comments:

"You are relying on your own judgment again. Believe me, it's a poor guide" (109).

"Do you think you can come back to your senses? You have been out of them for quite awhile" (109).

A professional educator shuns comments that casually destroy a child's self-esteem (Ginott 1972). While one adolescent may not be offended (or show overt signs of distress), another student might be deeply hurt. In addition to harming self-esteem, sarcasm poses a barrier to effective communication (Ginott 1965).

Teachers should strive for brevity when disciplining children. A middle school teacher reprimanded her class and obviously failed to understand the need for brevity. Her seemingly endless lecture went as follows:

You are talking and misbehaving much too much. . . . Why do you do this when you know I cannot teach when you do? . . . You talk in the hall and in the cafeteria, too. . . . Jason, you put down that book! How can you listen to me and look at that book? When I talk to you, you need to listen. Maybe that is why you are one of the worst in the class. . . . Now, what are you going to do about all this talking? . . . You are making it so much harder for me to teach. . . . Why do you talk so much? I just can't understand it.

The middle school teacher should have voiced her corrections briefly and then continued her lesson with-

out further interruptions. The students would have known her displeasure and would have been more likely to demonstrate more appropriate behavior.

Teachers should always use "I" messages instead of "you" messages. Ginott (1972) believed that "you" messages attack students' personalities and character. To avoid personal attacks, teachers should use "I" messages that show how the misbehavior makes them feel. "I am annoyed," "I am appalled," "I am furious" are safer statements than "You are a pest," "Look what you have done," "Who do you think you are?" (Ginott 1972, 86, italics Ginott's)

Politely asking a student to refrain from disturbing the class (whether the behavior be talking or getting out of one's seat) might be the most workable discipline measure. For example, instead of telling a student, "Sit down and shut up—you can find so many ways to disturb the class," the teacher might say, "I am bothered when someone walks around the room and talks to others. We do better when everyone cooperates."

Teachers, when disciplining, should provide students with a face-saving exit. Children often forget rules or perhaps even inadvertently break a rule. Teachers should develop a classroom management plan that teaches discipline rather than humiliates and embarrasses a student. Sometimes children break a rule only once and appreciate the teachers giving them an opportunity to agree not to make the same mistake twice. If a student says, "It will not happen again," the teacher should accept the child's assertion and avoid any additional comments. The child has agreed to the behavior expectations and simultaneously saved face.

Teachers should respect students' privacy and avoid asking prying questions. Although teachers have good intentions, they sometimes pry into children's privacy. One secondary teacher looked at Susan and said, "Why do you look so sad today? Your mom and dad quarreling again? Tell me what is wrong. Why don't you tell me what is wrong?" The teacher obviously felt concerned and realized that the child's emotional state would affect her learning and socialization; however, she invaded Susan's privacy. For any number of reasons, children might not want to share personal information. Ginott (1972) suggested that the teacher should ask discreetly and succinctly, "Can I be of help?" A private and simple "I'm available to talk if you want to" would have been sufficient. Susan would have known that her teacher was available and she would not have felt an intrusion on her privacy.

Teachers should provide appreciative praise and avoid evaluative praise. Most teachers use praise to reinforce proper behavior and to provide students with an indication of their learning progress. Praise has long been considered a means to shape behavior. However, Ginott divided praise into two types: evaluative praise and appreciative praise. He maintained that evaluative praise is destructive and appreciative praise is productive (Ginott 1972). Ginott (1965) suggested that parents (and his suggestions also apply to teachers) should follow a single and important rule about praise: Praise should deal only with the child's efforts and accomplishments, *not* with the child's character and personality (Ginott 1965, 39).

Samantha has earned a perfect score on all her spelling tests and she feels proud of her accomplishment. A teacher could use evaluative praise such as, "Samantha, you are such a good student. You have made a 100 on all your spelling tests so far this year. I know your parents are so proud of you! I am, too." But such praise would have placed an undue burden on Samantha. If she missed a word on the next test or any future test, she might feel that she was not a good student and that her parents and teacher would not be proud.

Diversity Perspectives

Ginott's theories promote congruent communication among cultures and between genders—important in our increasingly diverse schools. Students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, need positive perceptions of themselves and their cultures. Ginott's theories do not risk making students from another culture uncomfortable (for example, by expecting the students to look their teacher in the eye). Instead, Ginott's congruent communication and the accompanying positive

treatment of all students should be well received by all students, regardless of their psychological and developmental needs.

Perhaps because congruent communication is a disparate array of ideas rather than an established classroom management model, the theory can be used to address a number of student differences. For example, all students, regardless of their differences and their behaviors, need an enhanced sense of self-esteem and cultural identity. Likewise, their other psychosocial and cognitive needs must be addressed.

Conclusion

Teachers' success with Ginott's congruent communication will depend to a significant extent on their ability to consistently demonstrate and model positive communication, behaviors, and relationships. We think Ginott's theories have potential for middle-level and secondary teachers, as long as they share the mindset that teachers should demonstrate congruent communication. Also, committing to his work can help schools value and respect diversity. Even without a well-defined classroom management model, teachers can still use Ginott's ideas to complement other more established and developed models of classroom management.

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