

Education

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We invite teachers, administrators and educators to submit cases, techniques, procedures, approaches, research and articles for this regular opportunity to share effective approaches and to help further the application of democratic and Adlerian principles in school settings. Please send to: Edna Nash, 302-2020 Bellevue Ave., West Vancouver, B.C. Canada V7V 1B8.

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The Encouragement Council*

In many classrooms, schools, and faculty lounges, teachers and students do not express encouragement, appreciation, and recognition. These people spend school (and personal) time going from one power struggle to the next criticizing, nagging, bickering, and withholding positive encouraging feelings. Class members typically feel hurt, angry, resentful, worthless, uncooperative, isolated, and discouraged.

Teachers can find a way to "call a truce" and give each other and their students much needed encouragement and positive recognition. The authors believe that the Classroom Council or Encouragement Council is one of the most effective ways of providing, developing, and supporting a positive classroom environment. Much of the philosophical and methodological thinking that has gone into the Encouragement Council has come from the descriptions of the Family Council by Dreikurs, Gould, and Corsini (1974). They write, "The Family Council is a way for family members to enjoy one another as people; a way to achieve mutual (social) equality and (mutual) respect (p. 7)." In addition, Dinkmeyer and McKay (1976) have written that the family meeting provides opportunities for "expressing positive feelings about one another and giving encouragement (p. 98)."

The purpose of this paper is to describe a special type of Family Council

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adapted for the classroom, the Encouragement Council. The primary goal of the Encouragement Council is to help class members, both teachers and students, learn to give each other encouragement, recognition, appreciation and a feeling of positive closeness. In these meetings each student is given the opportunity to answer five or six discussion questions. Typical questions include, "What do you appreciate about each other (or a specific person)?" "What do you enjoy doing for another member of the class?" Classes have specific questions for each session of the Encouragement Council. The first two or three questions are warm-up questions to help the class learn to begin to relate to each other openly and positively.

This format is followed for the first eight to ten weekly meetings. In later meetings problems are discussed in the manner that Dreikurs, Gould, and Corsini (1974) have outlined in their description of the Family Council. However, all Encouragement Council meetings begin with encouragement discussion questions. This feeling of encouragement and support lays a strong foundation for solving later conflict situations. As Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) stated, "Encouragement is more important than any other aspect of child raising (p. 36)."

Ways The Encouragement Council Helps Form A Positive Classroom Environment

First, a discouraged classroom that is ready to "give up" gets the encouragement it needs to work on improving feelings and relationships in the classroom.

Second, even the most troubled student can be brought into the positive feelings that can exist in a classroom by receiving encouragement from other classroom members, the teacher included.

Third, class members who may normally argue or bicker can learn to appreciate each other.

Fourth, teachers can learn to give each other positive feedback. This helps improve their professional relationships and students see that "Teachers do what they say," and model the appropriate behavior which is seen in a favorable way.

Discussion Questions

What follows is a list of discussion questions with a suggested sequence for

each classroom meeting. In later meetings, questions can be chosen which appeal to the class as a whole. In addition, classes can usually make up their own questions. Small classes can usually answer six questions, larger classes might have to limit the number of questions discussed to four or five. The average meeting would be expected to last about twenty minutes.

Warm-Up Questions

1. What is the most enjoyable thing that you did this week?
2. What are you looking forward to this next week?
3. What is something that you do well?
4. What is something that you like about yourself?
5. What is something that you especially like to do for fun?

Questions for Beginning Sessions

6. What do you like about your class?
7. What would you like to see your class do that would help bring them even closer together?*
8. What is something fun about each other?*
9. What is an enjoyable thing that you could do together within the limits of the classroom?*
10. What do you appreciate about each other?*
11. What do you enjoy about each other?*
12. What is something that you have improved upon (that is, done better) recently?*
13. What is something that the class has improved upon recently?

Questions for Advanced Sessions

14. What is something that a class member did for you this or last week that helped you feel good about what you did?*
15. What is something that you did for someone in the class that you enjoyed doing?*

**for these questions it is important for the person to hear all positive feedback at once. Therefore, one person listens while all other class members direct their responses toward him or her.*

16. What is something that you might like to do for someone in the class this week?*(These last three questions would help develop and encourage social interest.)
17. What is something you might like to work on improving in your life?*
18. What is something that helps you feel closer to one another?*
19. What is something that you can ask for that you need from each other and would help you feel closer and more positive toward each other?*
20. What is something that you need or want from each other?*
21. What is something that you would like help with in your life?

Suggested Question Schedule For the First Ten Meetings

Meetings One and Two: Questions 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 10

Meetings Three and Four: Questions 1, 3, 6, 9, 11, 12

Meetings Five and Six: Questions 4, 6, 7, 10, 14, 15

Meetings Seven and Eight: Questions 4, 8, 11, 15, 18, 19

Meetings Nine and Ten: Questions: 5, 9, 10, 13, 16, 21

Guidelines for Encouragement Council Meetings

First, each participant agrees to drop their differences and demands during the meetings.

Second, participation is voluntary. No student is to be urged, forced or coerced to take part in the discussion. In silence there is participation.

Third, students of all ages can participate. Preschool children too young to respond verbally can listen, and still feel a part of the group.

Fourth, the class can choose the discussion questions from the list or expand and develop their own questions. The guideline here is that all questions must be positive and focus on appreciation and recognition of contributions. This also means any and all contributions, however small or seemingly insignificant.

Fifth, it can be helpful to have a discussion leader or chairperson at the meetings who can read the discussion questions, starts and ends meetings, and encourages participation. The discussion leader is a position that can be rotated each week.

Sixth, to avoid the problems of the over-helpful “talkers” and “favorites,” each discussion question can be answered clockwise starting from the discussion leader’s right or left (let the chairperson decide which way the discussion will take place).

Seventh, a counselor or trained teacher can help other teachers learn to use this method of encouraging students. It may be beneficial, but not necessary, for a counselor or experienced teacher to sit in and assist the class in their first meeting.

Eighth, in study groups teachers can learn to do Encouragement Council meetings by observing other meetings, or just wading in there and doing it.

Ninth, the same demonstration can be done in public teacher education sessions, where such Encouragement Council meetings can be an on-going experience.

Tenth, to encourage a withdrawn, discouraged, isolated, or noncompliant student it may be helpful to have a few special meetings with that child, and perhaps the parents, first. This kind of procedure helps bring really discouraged students back into the class as contributing members. If there is a particular problem between two class members, a special time can be arranged in which they can give each other positive feedback using the discussion questions. However, some students may choose not to talk. Let them make that choice.

Between Meetings

1. Students and teachers are asked to express their positive feelings when they feel them rather than holding back and waiting.

2. During the intervening week teachers are also asked to give bigger doses of encouragement and recognition to discouraged students.

3. Finally, teachers are asked to strengthen their individual relationships with each student by giving some type of “Special Time” to each one, such as acknowledging the student individually, acknowledging some individual achievement, spending some time with the child separately, or by increasing

the type or amount of affection or positive feeling shown to the student. This can also include acceptance, but is never to be moralizing, advice-giving, nagging, scolding, shaming or any of the other forms of subtle or direct attack teachers can use with students.

Classroom Problem Discussion

Hopefully after eight or ten sessions class members would look forward to their meetings. If the guidelines we have suggested have been followed, they now have a strong foundation for solving class conflicts. Classes can continue to begin the Encouragement Council with one or two discussion questions and a mood of cooperation and mutual support.

There are some guidelines for the handling of problems during the classroom discussion which will be summarized here. First, word the problem in a positive way. Use "I-messages" rather than "You-messages." Another example would be that of a teacher, instead of complaining that he or she is not getting cooperation in the completion of schoolwork, saying something like, "I'd like more of your help in doing these assignments. Can we spend more time on this together?" Or the teacher might say, "We seem to be having a problem in (one particular area of classroom behavior, i.e., tattling, fighting, etc.). What can we do about this situation? Does anyone have some ideas?" A student might say, "I'd like to talk about teasing on the playground," or a similar, but common, student concern. We are not trying to teach Attack Therapy, we are helping each other to learn to solve problems democratically. Second, look for a tangible effect. If there isn't one, perhaps it's not a problem for the class. If this is the case, it might be better to not spend class time on the issue. If someone is helping to irritate someone else, whether it's the teacher or student, then a private conference might be a better way to deal constructively with the matter.

Sometimes, perhaps often at first, class members will want to express anger during the meetings. This is also OK provided certain guidelines are followed. First, accept responsibility for your own anger. This goes for each student as well. Second, separate the anger from the person. That is, separate the deed from the doer. In situations where a teacher or student feels angry, communicate acceptance of the person, through disapproval of the behavior or feeling. Most importantly in these kinds of situations communicate to the student, or have the students communicate to each other, that there will be another time to deal with the issue we feel very angry about right now. Learning to express anger in constructive ways is very difficult and may require no small amount of practice. This applies to the teacher especially when the anger may be

directed at the teacher. Thus, if you are angry with a student it might be better to say, "John, I'm really angry about this right now. I have a hard time talking with you when I'm angry. I would like to talk about this later." Or the teacher can say, "John, both you and I are a little irritated about this. Let's deal with it next week (or tomorrow) when we're both in a better mood." It is vitally important that acceptance of the student as a person is communicated along with the anger and disapproval of a behavior. In this kind of interaction a student may feel quite vulnerable and needs to be reassured that he or she is still accepted as a human being. Giving that second chance for discussion is one of the best non-verbal ways to communicate this. Another might be a reassuring pat or touch to let the child know the acceptance is still there. Once the student and teacher do get together to work on the problem, there can be a discussion of both points of view of the problems, suggestions for dealing with it, such as consequences (not punishments) or penalties. There are a number of positive options open to the teacher and student. A warning to the teacher at this point would be never discuss consequences when you're angry. Consequences arranged, or inflicted, in anger are punishments. Punishments do not generally help, they mostly hinder, and help create more resentment which must then be overcome. Thus, it is not only important to take time to train your students to encourage each other and you, but take time to train yourself and your students to deal positively with their angry feelings.

To summarize, both teachers and students can learn to build on their strengths by encouraging, appreciating, and respecting each other through a special type of Family meeting, the Encouragement Council. Suggestions for ways to introduce and manage the Encouragement Council were outlined, with specific discussion questions and guidelines, and potential pitfalls. A number of positive results of the Encouragement Council were discussed, chief among them was the encouragement of isolated class members whose feelings of despair, failure and discouragement help keep them from participating in a positive way in the class. It was pointed out that in silence is participation, and no person or student should be forced to participate in class meetings. Some suggestions and guidelines for handling the discussion of problems were also made. Finally, the primary goal of the Encouragement Council is to help give each class member a positive sense of belonging in the class. As Allred (1976) stated, "Only when each member feels a sense of belonging will there be a feeling of unity. Each member needs to feel confident that he (or she) is a respected member of the group."

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The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt.

— Helen Keller