

The Power of Perception and the Skill of Composure

As we shared in the last edition time, [Conscious Discipline](#) is based on an understanding of how the brain works and how it impacts behavior and learning. From that foundation, Conscious Discipline provides Seven Powers of Conscious Adults and Seven Skills of Discipline for seamlessly integrating social emotional learning into academics and everyday activities.

The first skill of Conscious Discipline is [Composure](#) which comes from the [Power of Perception](#). The Power of Perception says that how you choose to see something determines how you will respond to it. Your perception of a situation influences your internal state and your state dictates your behavior. For example, if a child has their head down on their desk during a math lesson, you can choose to see the child as lazy and disrespectful which will send you to a lower internal state and set you up to punish the child. On the other hand, you could choose to see the child as overwhelmed and frustrated by concepts they don't understand. Viewing the situation in this way positively impacts your internal state enabling you to connect with the child and support her learning of the academic content as well as strategies to handle her feelings in appropriate ways.

Children must be seen differently in order to behave differently. Think about the frequent flier students in your discipline system that have essentially been labeled as "bad". Whether they are five or fifteen, they know it, their peers know it, everybody in the school knows it, and their parents know it too. "Bad" is a self-filling prophesy. How you choose to see challenging situations and students is up to you, but it will profoundly impact both you and the student. Change must start with the adult.

Composure is the corresponding skill that accompanies the Power of Perception. To be able to access our own brilliance and see the situation in a helpful way, the adult must be calm and composed and operating from his executive state. Composure is one of the skills used to create a felt sense of safety for everyone in the School Family. The brain requires safety in order to function optimally. Almost any discipline interaction can be brought back to safety. For example, it's not okay to push people because it's not safe. It's not okay to call names because it's not safe. It's not okay to wear hoods in the building because it's not safe. Conscious Discipline is about creating a sense of physical and psychological safety so that everyone can be in an optimal state for learning. Regardless of the wonderful lessons you have planned, brains that don't feel safe can't learn!

Safety requires a new job description for adults. In traditional discipline, the adult's job was to make kids behave and hopefully teach them some things along the way. Our job description in the School Family is that of Safekeeper. With Conscious Discipline, the adult's job is to keep the students safe and the students' job is to help keep themselves and others safe. This is the best thing since sliced bread

because it puts us all on the same team, thus preventing many power struggles before they even start.

Rather than having arbitrary rules, we collectively make class agreements about what it takes to keep the classroom safe. These are determined by the class when age appropriate and might include calling others by their name, using kind words, listening when others are speaking, and being respectful of classroom materials and the property of others. Each member of the School Family makes a daily commitment to focus on one of the agreements and takes time to check in with themselves about how our commitment went for the day. Was it successful or was it an OOPs (Other Opportunities to Practice)?

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching is behavior management. Conscious Discipline teaches that all behavior is purposeful and a form of communication. We can't simply demand that upset children calm down so they don't disturb our lessons or punish them for doing so. Many children do not have a healthy social emotional skill set so they literally do not know how to calm down when they feel threatened or the world isn't going their way anymore than they know how to complete a higher level math problem. Sadly, many adults don't either! We must first equip ourselves to name and tame our own emotions. Then we can teach children how to identify what they are feeling and choose helpful ways to move to a more positive internal state just as we teach academic concepts. The key is that this has to start with an adult who leads by example. A child will never be in a higher emotional state than the adult in charge. We set the tone and serve as a model for how to handle challenging emotions.

Conscious Discipline proactively teaches a variety of composure strategies for recognizing emotions and working through them. This is often done through a [Brain Smart Start](#) to the day or class. Teachers invest a few minutes at the start of class in an activity to unite, activity to connect, activity to disengage stress, and activity to commit. This has the powerful effect of building relationships among members of the School Family, which is where the motivation to honor commitments and help keep it safe originates, improves focus, and gets everyone in an optimal state for learning. At the same time, the Brain Smart Start is proactively teaching composure strategies during peaceful times so that students can call upon them during times of stress. It's really mindfulness in action with structure. Teachers all over the world who consistently start their day with a Brain Smart Start report that the time invested returns to them in dividends of reduced time spent managing disruptions and off-task behavior.