

The

# Adult Basic Classroom

For Florida Adult Basic  
Education Practitioners

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## What does a teacher do with an adult student who has lost her temper?

Angry students have the power to disrupt both their education and the education of others. So how can a teacher redirect the out of control behavior of students old enough to know better? More importantly, how can teachers help adult students learn to manage their own feelings of anger and develop a habit of discipline?

## ANGER AND DISCIPLINE IN THE CLASSROOM

Just because ABE/GED students are adults doesn't mean they behave appropriately in the classroom. Perhaps because of the outside stresses felt by adult students, anger management by the student and behavior management by the teacher are very necessary in the adult education classroom. Lack of discipline is still seen from both inside and outside the classroom as the number one problem in our educational system today. This lack of discipline may be part of the reason that our adult education students were not successful in their earlier educational experiences. If a teacher cannot manage the behavior in the classroom, that teacher cannot teach and those students cannot learn. So how does an adult education teacher maintain discipline in the classroom without belittling or bullying his students?

### ANGER MANAGEMENT

One way to help control behavior in the classroom is to teach students how to deal with their own anger. All students of all ages and developmental stages feel anger. No one can eliminate anger, in fact, sometimes anger can be put to good use. How does a teacher help direct the anger of students towards the safe and appropriate expression?

**First, teachers must help students talk about their feelings.** Using words to express anger is much more acceptable in all of society than using

one's fists or a weapon. This is easier when other emotions are talked about as well. It is good for the adult education teacher to initiate discussions of emotions before a disagreement is brewing. Many letters and essays and editorials have been written out of strong emotion and asking students to not only read and talk about such pieces but to create such pieces themselves can be the groundwork for peaceful disagreement negotiations later.

**Second, teachers should help students recognize the signs of impending outburst.** Have students keep a log of how different parts of their bodies feel when they experience different emotions. Have them include in this log what they do when they feel a certain emotion. When they are sad do they cry, or like to be by themselves, or seek out a certain friend, or want a particular food to eat? When they are scared, do they call someone on the phone, leave the situation, yell, or hide? When they are angry do they clench their fists, have a sweaty forehead, grit their teeth or tap their foot? Once students become aware of how they physically react to certain emotions they will be more aware of how they are feeling and will be better prepared to deal with that emotion when it hits them full force.

Students need to know what makes them angry. Have students list the things that make them angry. After they read over their lists, they could categorize the items on the list. Do

things that aren't fair make you angry? Do things that show you disrespect make you angry? Understanding the type of offense that bothers them the most can help students see an angry episode brewing.

**Third, teachers must help students find alternative ways to deal with anger.** It is hard to change a behavior if you have no idea what else to do. Talk with students individually and in groups about what to do instead of yelling, cursing, hitting, or making a spectacle when angry. It is very difficult for students to identify appropriate forms of expressing anger with so many inappropriate ways heralded in the media. A teacher-led discussion of celebrity inappropriate behaviors and what that celebrity could have done instead, would engage interest and could produce personal insights.

**Finally, teachers should model good anger management.** It is appropriate and probably healthy for students to see teachers get angry. No student will believe a teacher never gets angry; but a teacher discussing how he or she deals with anger and modeling good anger management will instruct the student. Students will become less afraid of anger and feel less isolated by it when they see another person, especially a teacher, dealing appropriately with it.

## DISCIPLINE

Of course anger is not the only behavioral problem in the adult education classroom. Discipline can be breached in many ways that do not involve anger. Adult students can talk too much, avoid their work, distract other students, show disrespect for themselves, their classmates and their teacher, and be class clowns. But adult students are not easily threatened or bribed into behaving. So what is a teacher to do?

Dr. Terry Alderman teaches in *Discipline: A Total Approach* that there are **four C's** involved in effective classroom management. The most important C in establishing an attitude of discipline in your adult education classroom is **Communication**. Adult students especially need to know what is expected of them as a member of a community of learners and what is expected of them by the State to be allowed to continue in the program.

Adult learners can set their own discipline goals in consultation with the teacher after they understand the criteria for success within the classroom. Because discipline has everything to do with control and little to do with misbehavior, all students need discipline goals. Students could set focus, achievement, progress and schedule goals that relate to personal discipline. Students could set behavioral, attitudinal, and relationship goals that relate to classroom discipline. For example, a student who has trouble participating in class could decide to develop his own discipline by reading two pages every day and his classroom discipline by speaking up in class once a week, perhaps about what he is reading. Another student who has problems with talking too much in class could set as her personal goal to take two math tests each month (which means she did not spend most of her math time talking to friends) and to listen without comment to at least one discussion in class each week. Setting such goals allows students to be involved in their own education and helps them understand why both personal and classroom discipline is necessary and how it applies even to the "good" students.

A second tool for establishing and maintaining discipline is **Commitment**. Teachers must be committed to

enforcing any discipline system they establish. If you allow the behavior, you endorse the behavior. So following up each disruption is imperative. The teacher should be willing to follow up personally with each student involved and publicly if a whole class is involved.

Also imperative is **Consistency**. Teachers must enforce their discipline policy, but they must also enforce it fairly across the board for all students. If an exception is merited so is an explanation.

**Care** provides the foundation for the use of all these tools. Teachers must care about their students, and students must believe that their teachers are concerned about them. If the teacher and students have a relationship based on trust and concern, then students are more likely to follow the discipline system established by the teacher. As in all human relationships, respect fosters respect. When we respect each other, we control our anger, listen, and do what is expected of us.

## LISTENING SKILLS

A key part of being able to maintain one's own discipline is being able to listen, and a key part of providing a learning environment is having students who can and are willing to listen. Teaching students to listen is an important job for the adult education teacher. Often ABE/GED students have had past experiences where listening did not immediately pay off for them. Nobody asked them what they understood or remembered or thought about the ideas in a discussion, and any written test on those ideas came days after the listening was required. Once students are asked to be involved in discussions and are expected to contribute to the conversation, listening takes on new meaning. There is an immediate consequence for not listening – the student has nothing to say. Periodically asking students to summarize material, to paraphrase another student's response, or to ask questions about the topic at hand keeps the students listening. If a student is listening, then she is focused on classwork and is "behaving," or enhancing the learning environment, not detracting from it.

The power of a teacher listening to a student cannot be overestimated.

Students expect teachers to practice the listening skills they teach. Sometimes a student may need you to listen to a song that is special to him or to a joke she thinks is funny. He really wants you to listen to the reason he was absent. Once students believe they will be heard, they are more interested in listening to others.

## IN CONCLUSION

Students can't learn in a classroom where behavior is out of control. Adults will not return to a classroom where they feel threatened or unwelcomed or too angry. Adults in ABE/GED classes do not want to waste their time. Effective adult education teachers create a disciplined learning environment for their students. This is done through establishing a relationship of trust and integrity with the students, by helping students identify their own patterns of behavior and areas of weak discipline, by being consistent and committed to enforcing a code of behavior, by teaching students to listen, and by listening to students communicate with you and with each other.

### SOURCES:

Alderman, Terry. *Discipline: A Total Approach*. For further information see [www.resourcesforprofessionals.com](http://www.resourcesforprofessionals.com) or phone (843) 838-7617 or e-mail [talderman@islc.net](mailto:talderman@islc.net). Thanks to *Teaching for Excellence*, Volume XXII, No. 4, December 2002 for bringing Dr. Alderman to our attention.

Editor: Margaret Wright-Cleveland  
Contributing Writers: Fran Riotte  
Margaret Wright-Cleveland  
Editing: Glenda Anderson  
Glenda Norvell

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We hope you enjoy this newsletter. If you have any comments or questions, please contact Lynn Cuniff, Leon County Schools Adult & Community Education, (850) 922-5343, [cuniff@ACE-Leon.org](mailto:cuniff@ACE-Leon.org)