

CHAPTER ONE

Responsibility-Centered Discipline

Defining RCD

COMING UP IN THIS CHAPTER ...

- What RCD is and what RCD is not
- What makes RCD unique
- Key concepts
- Autonomy, mastery, purpose
- Algorithmic versus heuristics

Most schools today exist in a sort of Bermuda Triangle of school discipline. When people think of the Bermuda Triangle, many things come to mind: ships disappear, planes go down never to be seen again, navigational equipment quits working and things disappear off the radar only to reappear again elsewhere. How do schools resemble the Bermuda Triangle? The three points of the actual Bermuda Triangle are replaced by the student, the teacher, and the administration. The chaos begins when a difficult situation arises between a student and a teacher in the classroom, and if the situation is problematic enough, the principal gets involved. Because the principal(s) did not see the event, they do not really know how it went down. This can cause the administration to question how it may have been handled. Leaders may say things that illustrate this doubt such as, “Why didn’t this teacher just talk to the kid?” or “I bet I know which classroom this student came from.” Because the teacher cannot hear what is taking place in the office, this can

cause them to begin to doubt the leader. This is demonstrated in frequently heard statements from classroom teachers such as, “I don’t even know where that kid is, I sent them out two days ago.” Or “I don’t know what they did with this kid, but they walked back in with a candy in their mouth!”

All parties are doing the best they can, but a lack of coherence in how behavior is managed causes dysfunction. Specifically, school leaders and their staff begin to mistrust one another.

Adding to the issue of poor consistency and transparency are two competing theories that dominate educator beliefs about the best ways to get students to improve their behaviors. *The Heart* or *The Hammer* is one way to conceptualize these theories. The hammer theory believes that being tougher on the student can drive a change in behavior. The heart theory believes that if good relationships are established, students will inevitably improve their behavior. These two groups of educators are often at odds with one another and, at times, at odds with the administration:

The Hammer

*The problem is we just coddle kids today.
No one is accountable for their actions in this school.*

The Heart

*Some teachers don’t want to get to know the kids
the way they need to.
Don’t these teachers understand trauma?*

Principals can find themselves trying to appease these two groups to keep staff on board. Said one principal, “I think my job has become either rescuing students from the angry teacher or rescuing the teacher from the angry kid.”

The hard part is helping the “warring factions” see that neither the heart nor the hammer perspective reliably predicts outcomes. This is easy to test: Ask a group of teachers to raise their hand if they have ever seen a consequence work, and almost every hand in the room will go up. Then ask the same group if they have ever seen a consequence not work, and every hand will go up. Ask if they have seen a relationship with a student change the behavior, and most hands will go up. Then ask if they have witnessed a student become more manipulative when a relationship is formed, or if they know of a student who will not let anyone get passed their guard long

enough to build a relationship? Again, almost every hand goes up. This proves that these approaches to student behavior are hit-or-miss.

Proponents of Responsibility-Centered Discipline believe it is time to reassess our classrooms and give leaders and teachers the skills to feel prepared for these challenging moments. With a new set of skills, educators can make good outcomes more predictable, instead of a roll of the dice. Rather than relying too heavily on *The Heart* or *The Hammer* which are hit-or-miss, true change comes from engaging a process in the student's brain. The following is an introduction to concepts that are essential for Responsibility-Centered Discipline. Subsequent chapters will discuss each in more depth.

A NEW APPROACH: DEFINING RESPONSIBILITY-CENTERED DISCIPLINE (RCD)

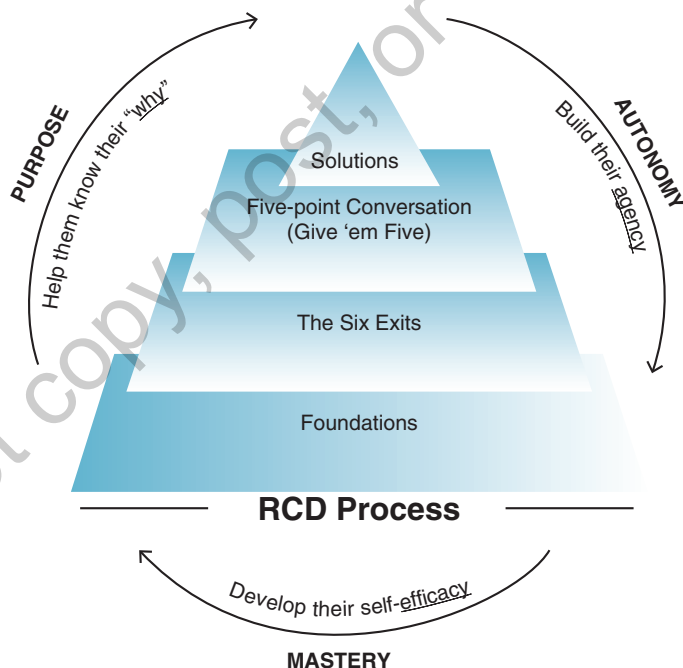
In 2011, Daniel Pink wrote *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. The guiding principles for RCD are heavily influenced by the framework in *Drive* focused on enabling people to become intrinsically motivated, through the internal drivers of autonomy, mastery, and purpose (more on this later). Most importantly, it posits that the goals that people set for themselves and that are devoted to attaining mastery are usually healthy and well-sustained over time.

Responsibility-Centered Discipline is all about helping students ignite their intrinsic motivation to be a valuable member of the school community, with educator support. First, RCD views productive behavior as a skill that can be learned as opposed to something students are born with, much like Carol Dweck's growth mindset work (2007). Just like a student can improve in reading, math, or science with the right instruction, so can their behavior improve with the proper guidance. While most educators know this intellectually, in the heat of a challenging moment, this knowledge is easily obscured. This is because in these tense moments, it can be very difficult for an educator to determine: (1) what a student is trying to communicate (which can often be different from what they are saying), (2) the right response that won't escalate or minimize the problem, and (3) when an issue is too big to handle at the classroom level. The RCD process, illustrated in [Figure 1.1](#), provides guidance for all this.

RESPONSIBILITY-CENTERED DISCIPLINE PROCESS

1. Lay the **school's foundations** which are a few simple goals that the entire staff wants to strengthen in every student.
2. Understand the **six exits** that both students and teachers commonly use that get in the way of students taking responsibility for their behavior.
3. Use a guided conversation, consisting of **five points (Give 'em Five)**, to help students take responsibility for changing their behavior.
4. Have a **solutions space** ready for students who need additional help. This is a reimagining of the in-school suspension rooms prevalent in schools.

FIGURE 1.1 • Responsibility-Centered Discipline Implementation Process



Source: AccuTrain

RCD is a systemic approach to school discipline wherein all adults in the building have a common language, clear protocols, and a working knowledge of which behaviors require which responses. Principals, teachers, students, and other key support staff have a clear role to play in the process. When the situation calls for a student to leave the classroom, RCD

creates trust across the building for how the situation will be handled. Staff can have faith that whoever worked with a student did their best to figure out the problem's root causes and offer the student the opportunity to come up with a viable solution.

It should be said now, and often, that RCD is not about getting rid of consequences or keeping students in the classroom or school at any cost. It is about finding lasting solutions to problems that students create and own. The goal of RCD is to take advantage of challenging moments with students and turn them into learning opportunities. While the approach is good for all students, it is especially designed for students who do not respond to the standard culture-building processes put in place at many schools.

As the name implies, responsibility is the main focus of RCD. Quite literally, the ideas in this process are all about helping students gain the *ability to respond* in a manner that can create lasting change. Educators already know that it is important not to take learning processes for granted when teaching students. They understand that good teaching is often about making the invisible, visible. RCD gives educators a common language and a system for making the habits of de-escalation, self-regulation, and good decision-making transparent for students.

WHAT RCD IS NOT

Creating a Responsibility-Centered Culture should be thought of as a journey, not a race. It is very different from “making kids behave.” RCD is not a fix-kids-quick scheme, but a transformative shift in how schools think about school discipline. There are no points, no treats for good behavior (although children are celebrated for mastering skills), no “sticks” to force kids to behave (although there are consequences as needed; “sticks” and consequences are not synonymous), no elaborate conversations with peers are required (although these are welcomed as a school sees fit). In general, while RCD does believe that some of these common practices are counterproductive, it does not ask schools to outright abandon these practices—few things are off the table. It does ask schools to reflect on how effective these practices have been, especially with their more challenging students.

RCD is also not scripted. Learning a few quick, catchy phrases is not a skill. When a script is used, it is easy to unintentionally communicate to students that they are not being listened to.

Students need to feel heard to get their brain in a position for problem-solving. RCD has enough structure that every teacher knows the framework for coaching through a challenging behavior but is given enough freedom, so their voice and personality are still in the conversation. This means that two people using the skill can sound very different. Lastly, RCD is not about how to help educators remove themselves from the conflict, but how to step into it with skill and support for the student who may not have enough skill to do this on their own.

HOW RCD IS UNIQUE

Figure 1.2 lists some key differences between RCD and other popular approaches. Once again, few strategies are off limits. This includes offering rewards, giving consequences, using restorative practices, or even issuing expulsions. There can be a time and place for some of these, and RCD is often complementary to these practices.

FIGURE 1.2 • RCD's Unique Approach

POPULAR MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES	RCD APPROACH
Clip Charts (red, yellow, green)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private, individualized plans • Student self-assessment
Restorative Circle Talks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restoration fostered through student-generated solutions as opposed to apologies • Designed to fit into typical school schedule • Activates heuristic process
Zero tolerance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pairs solutions with consequences • Differentiates based on circumstances and student needs
Point Stores/Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on internal motivation to build lasting change • Self-assessing • Celebrating student growth

The second half of this chapter will go a little deeper into autonomy, mastery, and purpose because these concepts are the heartbeat of this work. Most educators want their students to become self-motivated and find the internal

strength to do hard things in school and life. However, many educators, even parents, have been trained or believe that when self-motivation is absent, rewards and consequences will do the job. However, these often do little if the brain is not put in a position for growth. What really gets students on the path to be their best self is feeling proud of hard work (mastery) and understanding their personal why (purpose).

FOCUS ON AUTONOMY

Autonomy is the desire for humans to be in control of themselves. Surprise! The opposite of autonomy is dependence or even subjugation, and human nature tends to push against these emotions. When a student begins to feel controlled, they will often begin to fight for autonomy. For example, a teacher might tell a student they will not get recess this afternoon and the student responds with, “That’s okay. It’s too hot outside, and I wanted to stay in any way.” Or if a student is told they won’t get to go on a zoo trip if they don’t behave and the student replies, “I went to the zoo this summer and it was boring. They don’t even have monkeys anymore.” Educators need to notice this stance and not simply categorize the behavior as disrespectful. In the last example, the student really does want to go to the zoo, but the part of the brain activated by the teacher’s threats is the fight for autonomy. Once someone begins to fight for autonomy, the brain only cares about one thing, and that is not relinquishing control. Students can become very irrational in these moments.

FOCUS ON MASTERY

Mastery is the part within humans that wants to show the ability to tackle a challenge that takes effort, focus, and persistence. This part is often easy to recognize in young students. It sounds like this:

- “Did you read my paper yet?”
- “You should hang this one up!”
- “Did you hear about my game?”

They want to share that they can do hard things that take skill. Educators often activate the part of the child’s brain that feels strong when they *don’t* do a request instead of feeling strong when they *do* what is asked of them. The following is an

example of how two teachers set the class up for an autonomy fight versus a mastery accomplishment:

NON-EXAMPLE

The Autonomy Fight



Teacher A

Class we are getting ready to line up. It is important not to touch other people. No one wants to be touched and I need your hands and feet kept to yourself. So, when we go to art, keep your hands and feet to yourself. If you don't do that then you'll need to practice hands and feet to yourself at recess time.

Here's what happens: At least a few kids sneakily start touching someone in front or behind them, just to show they can. This teacher unintentionally activated some of the students' need for autonomy; feeling strong meant not meeting the goal. The student's need for autonomy results in them not doing what is asked to show the teacher they cannot be controlled.

EXAMPLE

A Mastery Accomplishment



Teacher B

Class we are going to go to art soon. We want to be respectful, and I know sometimes it can be hard to remember to keep our hands and feet in our own space when we are in the hallways. Before we get up, let's do a quick assessment on ourselves. Think to yourself, am I a "one," which means it is a little too hard for me. Or are you at a "two"? This means I may need a reminder or coaching. A "three" means I can do it all by myself. Last is a "four." This is easy for me, and I can help others. Now think of where you are right now on this. Once you decide, would the threes and fours please line up first and I will walk with those who feel they may need some coaching.

Most likely result: all students lined up and in the mastery part of the brain, desiring to demonstrate they are strong by meeting the goal.

FOCUS ON PURPOSE

Educators are often asked to find their "why." Students need to know their why too. When students feel needed,

impactful, and understand the personal benefits of their behaviors, they are more internally driven. Everyone has witnessed a student who rises to the occasion when given the job of helping someone else such as reading to younger students or helping a teacher with a project. Purpose is the reason most educators chose the profession. They want to make a difference and leave a legacy they can be proud of. Often, teachers give all the “purposeful” responsibilities to students who already have it together. Teachers can forget that all students want to feel purposeful, and that the seeds of purpose can live inside even the most challenging moments.

DOES THE STUDENT NEED AN ALGORITHM OR A HEURISTIC?

The last two key concepts to keep in mind before diving into the RCD are algorithms and heuristics. When a person is asked to complete a task, the solution will either be algorithmic or heuristic. An algorithmic task means the “task has an established instruction down a single pathway to one conclusion” (Pink, 2011). Think of a mathematical formula. Know the formula, solve the problem.

If there is no algorithm, then a heuristic process is needed. This usually means a person must experiment with possibilities and devise their own novel solution. One example is time management. For some, time management is easy. If the meeting is at 9:00 a.m., they begin to think of how long the drive is, what time they should leave the house, and ultimately arrive on time. The process is done without much effort. However, a large percentage of people struggle with being on time. A person who struggles to be on time will likely not get better through consequences. A heuristic process must be activated. Setting the clock ahead by 10 minutes is one way, or they can tell themselves the meeting is at 8:30 a.m. instead of 9:00 a.m. These strategies make little sense to punctual people but can work perfectly for the chronically late.

When schools respond ineffectively to student behavior, it is difficult to get a student’s brain to move to a heuristic process. RCD leaves the door open for the student’s brain to find its own unique heuristic to master the skill.

PRO TIP

It is common for educators to coach behavior from their own algorithms and tell a student how to change based on how the educator would solve the problem. It is important to position the student’s brain to create its own heuristic.



Key Takeaways

- The current ways we approach behavior are hit-or-miss at effectiveness.
- RCD is not a quick fix but a transformative shift. The goal is to take advantage of challenging behavioral moments and turn them into lifelong learning opportunities.
- This is a skills-based framework where educators learn to step into the conflict cycle to support students who do not have enough skills to do so on their own.
- To internally motivate students, we must ensure our educators understand the significance of autonomy, mastery, and purpose. All students desire autonomy, need mastery moments, and need to feel they have purpose.
- If a student does not have the algorithm, then make the task a heuristic process which means the student will need to experiment with possibilities and devise their own novel solution.



MEET JEREMY

Jeremy was a kindergarten student who struggled with respecting others' space. His teacher tried using rewards and consequences to get him to keep his hands and feet to himself, especially when walking in the hallways with his classmates.

Jeremy's teacher was desperate to figure out how to help him. She had taken away his recess so many times that he had learned how to counter this punishment with indifference: "I didn't want to go outside anyway. It's cold (or hot, or wet)." Or "I wanted to stay inside anyway."

Seeing that punishments were ineffective, she decided to take a more positive approach. As an alternative to taking away his recess, she would reward Jeremy if he changed his behavior. This worked for a few days, but as soon as he was not able to meet the expectations, he once again countered with indifference: "I don't even like that kind of candy." Now, just withholding a reward felt like a punishment to Jeremy.

After learning the RCD framework, the teacher began with “Jeremy, I know you can be a good friend to your classmates. Touching others while we are walking in the halls is causing some kids to not want to be your partner or walk near you in the halls. When I see that I can trust you to respect others’ space, then I’ll know I can also trust you to walk down the hall on your own. For now, I’ll have you walk with me. Think of a plan so I can trust you in the halls. Let me know when you have your plan, so you can share it with me, and we can see if you are ready to walk by yourself again. I’ll be anxious to hear your plan.”

For the next few days, she walked alongside Jeremy, not with the motivation to embarrass him, but to be supportive. She reminded him of the personal benefit he would get of being with his friends, when he solved this problem.

One day, as the class was getting ready to head down the hallway, Jeremy walked over to his teacher and said, “I want to walk with my friends. I have a plan. I brought buttons from home.”

The teacher was confused. “Buttons?”

Jeremy explained, “When I walk down the hall, I’ll play with the buttons in my pockets and that will keep my hands busy. They will remind me to keep my hands to myself.”

“That sounds like a great plan, Jeremy. But what will you do if you lose your buttons?”

He smiled proudly, “I already thought of that. If I lose them, I will just hold on to the inside of my pockets instead.”

“That sounds like a great plan, Jeremy!”

Now, just imagine what Jeremy must have looked like as he walked down the hallway with his buttons—so proud of himself for his plan, and for being able to accomplish this successfully.

The **autonomy** of coming up with his own solution, the **mastery** of getting better at being successful in meeting his goal and the **purpose** in this case, the personal benefit of becoming better at making friends and being able to walk on his own. This made all the difference in Jeremy’s behavior. Not only did his behavior improve, but greater trust and a more positive educator–student relationship was forged.



CONSIDER THIS . . .

Every Team Needs a Captain

A successful team has known components that make it rise above other teams. First, it has a strong team captain. For schools, that's the principal. This captain knows when to encourage, model, correct, and guide the teammates to help improve the team. A strong captain knows the players and even understands what each needs to improve. They have clear roles for each teammate and clear expectations for each member. Each team member knows their part while also trusting the others to know their parts. When a team is functioning at its best it can surpass expectations. RCD will give teams (staff) the clear path to lead each member to growth with clear expectations, practice feedback, and support. They will learn to trust the leader's role in behavior management and can accomplish far beyond what most educators have seen in schools. When this occurs the results are motivating, and staff often rediscover their purpose.

Ready, captains?