

we think you need a vacation...

The Discipline Model at Fresh Youth Initiatives

*by the FYI
writing team*



Maria and Arabel Torres

Fresh Youth Initiatives (FYI) is a youth development organization based in the Washington Heights–Inwood section of Manhattan. Our mission is to support and encourage the efforts of neighborhood young people and their families to design and carry out community service and social action projects, develop leadership skills, fulfill their potential and realize their dreams.

We accomplish our mission primarily through our youth-led, adult-facilitated community service and social action program, “Community Youth in Action.” FYI programming consists of projects that include making sleeping bags for the homeless, the operation of New York City’s only youth-run, adult-facilitated food pantry, painting the apartments of senior citizens, community mural projects, free clothing distribution and, coming soon, a “Goodwill-”style store. Yet with all of our very creative service and action projects, we

are most proud of the culture that we have been able to create among our young people, their families and the community. Ours is a tightly knit, focused group dedicated to the development of altruistic and civic-minded behavior in our program participants. Our tag line, “Taking Responsibility for Things that Matter,” has become a beacon for the behavior expected from our members.

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We have developed a successful culture by asking a very simple set of operational questions. We ask our participants, “What type of person do you wish to be?” We ask our families, “What type of family do you wish to be?” We ask the Washington Heights–Inwood community, “What type of community do you wish to be?” And we ask our collective, “Can we, FYI, help you be that person, that family and/or that community?” So far, we like our answers. The young people of FYI have performed a stunning 42,000 hours of volunteer community service since our inception, and volunteers within our community have assisted us in having a major impact on the landscape of Washington Heights–Inwood.

In this article we hope to introduce what we feel are some of the keys to our success: the marriage of community service and social action to youth development, and a philosophy of discipline that encourages the very best behavior from our program participants.

Discipline: Moving toward a Definition at FYI

FYI believes that the development of self-discipline in young people is shaped and defined by the drive toward self-consistency. This drive is often manifested in the natural conflict between the idealized self (who they wish to be) and the real self (who they really are). To assist in closing the gap between these inconsistencies in a young person, FYI seeks in its programming to develop opportunities that help young people to make important adjustments. FYI recognizes that the factors important to the development of self-discipline are both internal and external. All young people have needs and goals that they wish to fulfill, and these are the internal forces. However, they must exercise these needs and goals within a larger society and its institutions, and these represent the external influences.

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foundations that are laid in childhood and adolescence. It is particularly during adolescence that individuals begin seriously to explore and define their own value systems. It is within the context of after school programming that we have the opportunities to facilitate this development in our participants. With the development of this discipline model and its use within our organizational fabric, FYI has attempted to become more intentional about its role in the development of young people.

FYI’s Disciplinary Principles: A Positive Process

Effective discipline at FYI is rooted in the proper use of some basic principles that apply to most situations with young people. Our discipline model, grounded in the principles of youth development, reflects the spirit of our mission. It does not seek to enforce punitive measures, but seeks instead to facilitate the development of caring, responsible, independent adults. More than a model of discipline, it is a system of management that ensures our participants that they are getting the most out of their experiences at FYI. We believe that when these principles are properly used, they help young people to achieve the goals of discipline by moving them toward a clearer, more consistent definition of self by narrowing the gap between the “real self” and the “idealized self.”

Effective discipline is the result of conscious strategic planning by program staff to manage behavior. The authors believe that discipline involves teaching young people to be autonomous, socialized individuals. Organizations can apply the following principles to guide their young people’s behavior and development:

- Decide and agree upon the types of behaviors that you want your participants to learn and the types of behaviors you would like to help them change.
- Create a vehicle for discussing the behaviors that are important for your participants to change or develop.

- Create a vehicle for discussing and agreeing upon expectations with your participants, as well as incentives to be awarded for successful completion of specific tasks or movement toward developmental goals.

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Leonel Gomez geared up for a park cleanup.

change came quickly. We took note, and an organizational strategy emerged that we felt would help him to make a choice about the type of young man he wished to be. That opportunity for change came about innocently enough when I walked into an FYI program space just in time to witness him firing a piece of balled-up paper across the room at another FYI participant.

On that very day he earned the first and perhaps one of the most notable FYI “vacations.” In our practice “vacations” are an opportunity for reflection during which young people are asked to take anywhere from one day to one week off or, in the most severe cases, to take one month or more off from FYI programming. In each case the participant is asked to reflect upon the incident or behavior that caused the vacation and to

Organizations are responsible for observing their participants’ behavior and consistently rewarding their success during these teachable moments.

Tales from Our Practice: Disciplinary Challenges

Several FYI staff members share their experiences applying this disciplinary model in their work with young people.

Rodney’s Story. Our experiments with discipline began rather innocently. I recall meeting a wonderful young man named Walter, back in 1997. He was ten years old at the time, and clearly beginning to test a new attitude. Let’s just say that it was negative.

Our staff observations about his attitude

return with answers to a carefully prescribed set of questions that include: “What type of person do you wish to be?” and “Can FYI help you be that person?” In our history, we have actually given away so few vacations that these vacations stand out, in and of themselves.

But, I’m getting ahead of my story. Walter was disciplined for one week, a disciplinary measure that is severe by FYI standards. He was so embarrassed that he never told his mother, but came to the FYI offices instead. He never set one foot inside, but ate his pizza and did his homework every day that week in the hallway outside our office doors. We, of course, had contacted his mother, who understood and endorsed our strategy.

At the end of his vacation, to the surprise of our entire staff, Walter returned, a more committed and dedicated participant.

Successive attempts at discipline with other young people yielded similar results. On each occasion, young people returned even more committed and dedicated, not only to the program, but to themselves. These young people seemed to have a clearer vision of the type of person they wished to be and of the role that FYI, or their participation in FYI could play in becoming that person.

Walter's family moved from Washington Heights–Inwood to the Bronx two years after this incident. However, in an ironic twist, he requested a summer job with FYI last summer. He commuted from the Bronx to Washington Heights–Inwood, and was, as before, a most disciplined and dedicated participant.

Maria's Story. Toward the end of a typical program day, I noticed that my cell phone was missing. Prior to this realization, one of the young people, Sonia, had come to my office to inquire about my cell phone, claiming that she was planning to buy one. I answered each of her questions without much thought. A little later, I made a possible connection and called my cell phone to see if it would ring somewhere in the office. When it rang, some girls picked it up, giggled and then hung up. I was upset.

A co-worker, Laura, happened by and found me in the middle of this distress. I informed her of the situation, so she too dialed my cell phone, pretending that she was calling for me. Some girls answered the cell phone again. Laura asked, "Can I speak to Maria?" This time, the girls seemed to become very nervous, and perhaps confused about what to do next. Sensing their plight, Laura identified them as FYI members, scolded them and demanded that they return the phone or risk not being invited on our next incentive field trip. The girls, apparently very nervous and confused, simply hung up.

Based on my experience, this was unusual behavior for young people in FYI. The next day when I arrived at work, I found messages from the mothers of two of FYI's program participants. Sonia's and Anja's (one of Sonia's closest friends) mothers had both called. I

immediately returned their calls. Both mothers explained that their daughters had confessed to having made a terrible mistake by stealing my cell phone, and both mothers expressed their own anger, disappointment and embarrassment. It was only at this point that I finally realized that my phone had actually been stolen. Up until that moment, I thought that the girls had taken it simply to play a trick on me (not a very funny one, by the way, but still, just a trick).

In keeping with FYI's style, the parents and I agreed to have a meeting the next day at 3:00 P.M. Both moms and both daughters were present, as was one of my co-workers, Joann. As the story went, Anja saw the phone in FYI's computer lab and decided to put it in her bag so that she could share it with Sonia. We recognized that within this unfortunate event there was a teachable moment. At the meeting we all discussed the consequences of our actions. As a result of this incident, the girls did not receive a vacation, but were instead asked to write a reflection, in which they were able to express their apologies, regrets and feelings of remorse.

Shortly after this incident, FYI held "Community Presentations," a ceremony during which we recognize the young people for their accomplishments. Anja's mom was reluctant to come. She was still somewhat embarrassed over the phone incident. FYI staff members made a point of reaching out to her, reassuring her that the incident had been dealt with and forgiven. Anja's mom came to "Community Presentations" that year. Today, both families, including other siblings and relatives, are among the most dedicated members of the FYI family.

Tania and Jayson's Story. One of our main criterion for young people participating in our program is their ability to arrive at the office in time to sign up for and join a community service group. Carl lives in the same building that houses our main office. Long before he was old enough to participate in our organization, he was joining us for service every now and then. Once he was old enough to fully attend, his

participation was inconsistent, at best. This past year he has made numerous attempts to participate. Unfortunately, he consistently arrived at the office half an hour, sometimes an hour, after program has already started, hoping that we would bend the rules to accommodate him. Each time he came to the office he was usually met, by me or by some other staff person, with the same response: "If you want to do community service, you have to get here no later than 4:00." He usually responded with some excuse, which may or may not have been legitimate. "But Tania, I had to go somewhere with my aunt," or "I had to stay late at school because I got into a fight." I would often reply, "Carl, if you want to join a group, you have to be able to get here by 4:00, or even earlier if you want to have more choices, because spots get filled up

quickly." He would eventually leave, sometimes in anger, feeling that we had wronged him and were making it impossible for him to participate. This went on for several weeks. One day he again came in late, but this time was greeted by another staff member, Jayson, who reminded him of the same policy, but followed up with:

Jayson: What time do you get out of school?

Carl: Three.

Jayson: That certainly leaves you enough time to get here on time.

Carl: But I like to hang out with my friends.

Jayson: Well you need to decide what you want to do—hang out with your friends or get here in time to join a community service group.

Ultimately, Carl opted to hang out with his friends, a decision that we would not have made for him, but nonetheless was his decision to make. However, since that last interaction, he has decided to get to the office in time for program more frequently.

Our goal is to help the participants take ownership of their behavior and make a decision about how valuable that behavior is in their lives.



FYI community planter. Handmade and managed by kids.



Adoni Famalia working in the youth-run food pantry, the Helping Hands Food Bank.

Rosalva Casanova at work in the FYI community garden at P.S. 128.

Laura's Story. After having been a part of the FYI staff team for ten months, I find it fascinating to look back at my early days and reflect on my evolution as a young staff member. During my first few months I was frequently confronted with difficult situations where discipline was required. They tended to be minor incidents, such as cursing, a young person goofing off rather than working, two boys calling each other names and teasing and taunting each other, kids taking off before their community service project was finished and cleaned up. We're not talking about guns, drugs or fist fights. I was just a new adult facilitator trying to gain the respect of a few youths, figuring out how to establish and use power correctly, while at the same time wanting to be liked.

Today, I laugh at the ways the kids tested and frustrated me.

After sleeping in the same cabin during overnight field trips, working together daily, painting side by side for many months, the small scenes happen less frequently now. We finally trust each other. The trust is still young, but I look at them with understanding eyes. I know what makes the participants laugh, and, when it is time for me to talk about behavior, the conversation takes place in a wider context of trust, acceptance and desire for better personal development. They show more willingness to listen to me, because they know me. This comfort level invites our participants into a dialogue. My concern for the youth in FYI allows me to share my ideas regarding their behavior and they are free to offer criticism of me as well.

Acceptance, tempered with calmly enforced high expectations, characterizes the healthy participant-organization relationship.



Priscilla Novas and Mabel Frias show visitors how to make an FYI sleeping bag for the homeless.

Mabel Frias and Lorraine Mercado with their homemade gingerbread house.



FYI youth-designed community mural at the intersection of Wadsworth and 181st Street in Manhattan.

FYI's Principles of Effective Discipline

Staff and organizational teamwork

Faced with a situation requiring discipline, a staff member should seek the assistance of another staff member in order to develop an appropriate strategy and ensure objectivity in the handling of the situation. No single staff member should ever own a particular issue, and, when involved in a disciplinary action, should always be accompanied by another staff member.

Reasonable consequences with follow-through

This entails staff/organizational attention to the appropriateness of a disciplinary action. Once decided upon, the action must be carried out. Upon completion, there must be a reflective process between the involved staff and the participant(s).

Consistency

When working with young people, expectations must be uniformly maintained. Rules should be applied as uniformly as possible.

Pacing and ownership

Expectations and disciplinary actions are consistent and adapted to each young person's developmental level. Punishment is never the goal. The goal is to help the participants take ownership of their behavior and make a decision about how valuable that behavior is in their lives.

Modeling

Staff and the organization monitor their own behavior, in order to model agreed-upon behaviors for our participants.

Immediate feedback

The quicker the consequences of actions are experienced, the greater the opportunity for learning.

Truthfulness

Staff and the organization must be truthful with participants. It is especially important to be

truthful about the reasons for the organization's expectations.

Trust

Staff and the organization verbally express trust in the participants and act in a trustful manner toward them until such trust is violated. Should trust be broken, the door is always left open for the participant to restore and repair that trust.

Acknowledging the drive

No matter how severe the circumstances, staff should be mindful of their language and approach to the participant to avoid creating a "defensive" situation. Effective disciplinary practice facilitates closing the gap between the inconsistencies of the "real self" and the "ideal self."

Confidentiality

Rooted in the staff/organization's ethical responsibility to keep material confidential is the need to deal with a participant's issues privately and discreetly.

Self-disclosure

Program participants need to feel and understand that the organization and staff are as human and fallible as they are. They especially need us to acknowledge the mistakes we make in their presence.

Acceptance

Finally, perhaps the most important principle of FYI's discipline model is acceptance, the type of acceptance that says, "Even though you have earned a vacation for several days, you will never be asked to leave our family. We expect you to return. In fact, we want you to return. But please return with a clearer sense of the type of person that you wish to be and the role that you think we can play in helping you become that person." Acceptance, tempered with calmly enforced high expectations, characterizes the healthy participant-organization relationship. Acceptance is never achieved by accident. True

acceptance cannot be won, earned, bought or feigned. It is given and deserved because we are human. The organizational act of acceptance includes forgiveness, grace and closure.

Conclusion

The opportunities present in after school programming are exciting. As FYI staff, we have often discovered our own ability to struggle, grow and develop as individuals as a result of our discipline model's goals of self-direction, self-actualization and socialization.

In addition to the principles of discipline presented above, there are several other program elements that we feel can help the young people of our organization to accomplish their developmental goals. They include: having fun, setting limits, looking for learning opportunities, making room for a participant's liberty, supporting appropriate choices, helping them understand and experience their own personal power and facilitating the understanding of consequences. We attempt to keep these factors in relative balance with each other and with the aforementioned principles of discipline, as we develop and perform community service and social action programming within our community.

About the Writing Team

This article was produced by the FYI staff writing team, a group which meets every Tuesday morning throughout the program year. The team's goal is to put the developing science of FYI programming

and practice into writing. Other FYI staff teams include program, space and service teams; team meetings, a consistent fixture in the FYI culture since 1994, are an offshoot of the weekly staff team meeting during which all programming issues and new developments are presented, discussed and acted upon. All other teams have been meeting for one or two years.

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