No More Excuses!
Helpful Hints Series #7
from Dr. Barry Ziff

Who we are and how we act is learned. How we think determines how we feel. And how we act is determined by our thoughts and feelings. Those students who are struggling in school are at risk for not developing a positive attitude about school or life in general. These students usually do not feel good about themselves, they make poor choices and decisions and they often make excuses about their failure to do the assigned work. Developing responsibility helps children make good choices rather than finding excuses for their failures. As a teacher you have a critical role to play in helping your students become responsible individuals. The best method for adults to build responsibility in children is by giving them an opportunity to be responsible and helping to make each child aware of the consequences for not being responsible.

For example, if a student is in the habit of not completing homework assignments what do you do? Do you yell, manipulate or bribe them? We need to ask: Does the assignment meet their specific needs? Does the student have a special place to complete his work at home? Does the student understand the assignment? Answering these types of questions will help the teacher develop a plan to solve the issue. With the parent’s permission a student could stay after school several days a week in order to complete assignments. Teachers can ask parents to provide a specific place and time at home for students to complete their work. Incentives and rewards can be provided to encourage that the work be completed in a timely manner. Together, the teacher, parent and student can set objectives that can empower the student to continue to act in a productive and responsible manner.

It is very important for students to realize that they are responsible for managing their behavior. If good things happen it is because of them. If bad things happen, it’s also because of them. Each of us is responsible for our attitudes and for the consequences of our behaviors. If we choose to be responsible, then we have the power to change the situation. We always have the choice to make things better for ourselves. Teachers can point out how other people strive for excellence. It’s hard work to become an Olympic champion. Shaun White the Olympic gold medalist in snowboarding spent years practicing to become the best snowboarder in the world. Students need to understand that it takes perseverance and determination to become successful. There are no quick fixes to become happy and successful.

When a student chooses to become responsible they eliminate the need to nag, scream, make threats and feel guilty. The student needs to understand that the adult is in control, but it is the student who makes the choices, which determines the outcome. The teacher needs to provide opportunities for the students to make decisions and choices on a daily basis. This will encourage students to take responsibility for their lives. The teacher can be supportive by:

1. Teaching students to break down tasks into small, manageable parts.
2. Making a “to-do” list and posting it in a prominent area and crossing off finished tasks.
3. Setting a timer so students can be guided to work and then take a break before going back to work.
4. Suggesting parents provide a special place to complete the work at home.
5. Reviewing early and often for tests.
6. Having supplies and materials available.
7. Making flash cards of specific topics and information for study and review.
8. Make sure students are rested and eat healthy.
9. Provide verbal praise often.
10. Make students feel they are worthy of respect and success.

Having a positive attitude and knowing that you are well prepared is a positive step in becoming a responsible and successful individual. Each child needs to receive positive and frequent feedback through verbal praise and scheduled mini-conferences. A teacher’s role is to lead each student in discussions to help develop habits that foster responsible behaviors and appropriate choices. Students will demonstrate responsible behaviors because they will receive privileges, gains, pay-off and personal satisfaction. By being irresponsible, by whining and using coercion they will lose privileges, freedom and self-worth.

It takes consistency, time, specific strategies and structure to help an individual develop responsible behaviors. When teachers consistently reinforce positive behaviors with praise and tangible rewards, students over time, will develop an “I can do it” attitude. It is important that the teacher does not give up on the student. It took many years for the child to develop his/her inappropriate habits. Therefore, it will take a similar amount of time to change that behavior.

Students learn responsibility best when they are called upon to be responsible. It is then, and only then, that individuals learn the cause and effect of their behavior. In the end, those who demonstrate responsible behavior recognize and acknowledge responsibility for everything they do. Developing a positive attitude provides each individual with a sense of freedom and a healthy self-concept.

Once we feel good about ourselves and we are willing to take more risks in our lives we no longer have the need to make excuses for our failures. At this point we now understand that life is about making choices and living with the consequences of those choices. And maybe, we will remember the teacher who helped us realize our potential and be thankful for their support and guidance.