

Preventive Strategies for Classroom Management

A classroom that is designed with good proactive strategies in place allows the teacher to spend much more time on teaching and less on dealing with student behavior. Of course, putting those proactive strategies in place takes an investment of time at the beginning of the school year. Taking the time to develop and teach classroom expectations and systems will result in a strong behavioral foundation to be utilized the whole year. This investment will pay off many times over. Here are some key elements to creating proactive classroom strategies that will help eliminate unwanted behavior and establish a positive learning environment.

1. Reinforce and celebrate good behavior.

Punishment will teach a child what he should not do. It will not teach a child what he should do. Rewarding a child when he or she behaves in an appropriate way is the best way to teach and reinforce new behavior. The more creative the ways to "catch children being good," the more often children will learn positive new behaviors. Rewarding positive behavior is also an invaluable tool in maintaining a positive classroom-climate structure. Some suggested strategies include:

Use tangible positive reinforcement.

- Give out stickers.
- Post a good behavior train. Students who keep their car on the tracks all week get a reward.
- Allow students who behave well to put their names in a lottery jar. At the end of the week, there is a drawing for a prize. The better a student behaves the more chances he or she has to win.
- Use team or class rewards. For example, a teacher can keep a bean or popcorn jar on her desk. Every time the class performs well, she places a handful of beans or popcorn in the jar. When the jar is filled, the class receives a treat. The treat could be a prize, a story, or a game.

Praise the students frequently for identified good behavior. For example, always make sure to praise individuals and classes when they are following classroom rules.

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2. Provide thorough and consistent classroom structure.

The more a teacher structures all the details of classroom activities, the more students will stay on task. Structure takes time and planning before students arrive. If routines are clear and rehearsed, activities flow from one to another. Unstructured time in class or disorganized transitions from one activity to the next are often key reasons for classroom misbehavior.

Some specific suggestions include:

- Design functional room arrangements. Keep stimulating objects out of reach. Make sure student seating arrangements promote classroom activity.
- Have materials and chalkboards prepared before pupil entry.
- Develop classroom routines. For example, there should be well-rehearsed routines for lining up, going to the bathroom, handing in papers, sharpening pencils, and so forth.
- Evaluate your classroom. If misbehavior is more common during some activities than others, develop routines that minimize the possibility of disruption.
- Always compliment the class if routines are followed well.
- Focus students before you start activities. Get attention before you begin to talk, and give a rationale for the activity.
- Make good use of teams. Make sure team incentives are in place. Use team rewards routinely.

3. Good curriculum and teaching plans promote good behavior.

If students are interested in class and have opportunities to experience academic success, they are less likely to misbehave. Time spent developing creative and well-paced lessons is essential. If a class has not gone well, take the time to review the lesson plan. Was the plan well paced? Was the material presented in an interesting way? Were there opportunities for participation? Careful assessment of lesson plans and creative instruction minimize classroom misbehavior.

Some specific suggestions include:

- Make sure lesson plans reflect identified learning needs.
- Stress the importance of active participation by students.
- Incorporate student interests into lesson plans.
- Promote whole-class learning through thorough and continuous planning that challenges the faster children and supplies immediate assessment.
- Stay on task.

4. Develop effective classroom rules and consequences.

Rules and consequences that are few, specific, and consistent are generally the most effective. State rules positively. This identifies the desired behavior for the child rather than just forbidding the undesirable one. To maintain a positive climate, rehearse rules before misbehavior occurs. Always comment positively when the class complies with the designated rules.

Some specific suggestions include:

- Develop classroom rules with students. Involving students in the planning process increases students' motivation.
- Teach desired behaviors. For example, teach and practice active listening with all the children. Students should be able to demonstrate the active-listening posture: no talking, eyes on the speaker, hands in lap, chairs turned to speaker. This classroom behavior can be easily practiced and is an effective classroom rule.
- Discuss consequences beforehand.
- If consequences are needed, stay firm, consistent, and matter of fact. Becoming angry or bargaining with students are counter-productive strategies that often result in power struggles.
- Compliment the child on successful completion of consequences.

5. Use nonverbal communication consistently.

The intentional use of nonverbal language is an often-overlooked teaching strategy. Nonverbal communication is very powerful. For example, we have all had the experience of feeling as if someone is in control from the moment they enter the room. A person can communicate without using any words at all. It is effective use of nonverbal language that makes this happen.

Some specific suggestions include:

- Be congruent. Your verbal language and your body language should match. Your posture, gait, facial expression, and voice tone should match your message. For example, do not talk over students if you want silence. Your behavior and your words do not match. Get student attention first.
- Use proximity to nip misbehavior without words.
- Use eye contact to gain student attention.
- Use a soft voice to reprimand students. Lowering the pitch is more effective than yelling.
- Use hand signals. Have a Zero Noise Signal. Use the Active Listening Signal.
- Model correct behavior. Make sure that your behavior is congruent with what you wish your students to do. For example, avoid yelling, belittling comments, or sarcasm if respecting others is a classroom rule or goal.

6. Act as if.

A subtle but effective tool for teachers is always to act as if students are eager and willing to comply. Hypnotists have known for centuries that this type of suggestion has real power. Studies on self-fulfilling prophecies with teachers and students also confirm the real benefit of making sure teacher expectations are high and positive.

Specific suggested actions include:

- Self-monitor. The more you act as if you are self-assured and feeling positive about the day and the students (even if it is one of those days), the better your day will be.
- Watch your language. Assume compliance. For example, always say "when you complete this assignment" not "if you complete this assignment."

7. Have a zero-tolerance rule.

If a classroom has rules about noise or interruptions, make sure you hold to the letter of the law. If a teacher wants quiet but allows some talking, the noise will gradually increase until it is a problem. The students are not really at fault here. By allowing some part of the prohibited behavior, the teacher has muddied the clarity of the rule and encouraged student misbehavior. Teachers must make rules that they can enforce and then stick to them.

8. Use metaphors to promote a positive climate.

Often rules and behavior can be controlled in a more positive and entertaining way if teachers employ metaphors as an intervention. A preschool teacher had good success with telling children to "turn down their radios" (with a hand motion) rather than telling students to be quiet. Painting pictures with words captures the interest of children and provides a more positive way to remind students of expectations. The "good behavior train" or "planting a garden" of good behaviors can all become symbolic shorthand reminders for students.

9. Maintain a benevolent hierarchy.

Children do best when the teacher is clearly in charge. A teacher should be kind and benevolent but still in control. Being buddies with students is not the best approach. A classroom without a leader is generally chaotic. A teacher should strive to be concerned about each student while remaining clearly the leader of classroom activity.

10. Promote cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning uses the energy of peer interaction for learning, promotes social skills attainment, and develops positive leadership skills. Besides the academic advantages of cooperative-learning strategies, classroom management is enhanced through the utilization of this approach.

11. Involve parents in your classroom.

Parents are an important but often an overlooked key to preventive classroom management. The more parents are aware of classroom activities and feel connected to the school, the more effective discipline strategies will be.

Some specific suggestions include:

- Send home good news notes for parents. Build a relationship with parents before problems occur. Some teachers routinely make a visit to a family when a child's behavior improves. These visits can often make the difference between parent passivity and parent involvement.
- Send home class newsletters.
- Routinely call parents in the fall to introduce yourself and to explain the reading program.

- Use family-based reward systems whenever possible to address problems.
- Let the parent tell you about the child. Parents know their children better than anyone else; use their expertise to gain a fuller understanding of their child and to find the best approach for classroom success. Using a parent's expertise has the added advantage of enlisting the parent as a partner in addressing any school problems.

Behavior-Management Strategies

The broader the array of strategies a teacher possesses, the more varied her response to undesirable behaviors. This is sometimes a key in ending a behavioral problem. Varied behaviors call for a variety of strategies for intervention. Educators have a tendency to react in the ways that are most comfortable for themselves, instead of considering what will have the greatest impact on the child. When you consider that the goal of intervention is to end the behavior and redirect the student, having a variety of strategies designed to address the needs of the student is important. This section of the manual lists various strategies for teachers to add to their responses. Some of these strategies will come easily, others are less comfortable. For the teacher to be prepared to deal with potential behavior problems, it is beneficial to become familiar with the entire list. To develop an increased comfort level and the ability to apply these reactions, it is important for teachers to practice in safe, nonthreatening environments. As teachers practice, they will find an increased comfort level and ease of use for a variety of skills. A master teacher is often recognized by her ability to address the needs of the child in a way that meets the child's needs and redirects the behavior. Here is a list of such strategies:

Overarching Rules:

- **Determine your desired outcome:** Whenever you are faced with conflict, it is best to stop and determine your desired outcome. Otherwise you end up reacting to the situation, rather than directing it. By making a commitment to what you would like to see happen, you can strategize and plan your interactions.

- **Develop your own Chill Strategy.** Everyone is different, so what helps one person calm down might not work for the next person. It is important to identify what works for you in advance. It might be taking a deep breath, counting to ten, separating for a brief period, or possibly taking a drink of water. If you have to deal with conflict regularly, it will help you to know what techniques work to help keep you calm.

- **Remain in control.** The key to maintaining control is to stay calm. Benjamin once said "the calmest person in the room will be the one in control of the situation." When you stay calm you will be more able to "calculate" your actions and reactions.

- **Limit your words.** Choosing your words wisely is very important in a situation of conflict. Oftentimes, adults think of this as a time to teach a lesson through a lecture. We all know the truth; you have about one sentence to make your point. After that the child stops listening, and your words only serve to escalate the situation.

Additional Strategies:

Ignore the behavior. With some behaviors, bringing attention to them will only create a bigger problem. It might be better to ignore the behavior. This is especially true with attention-getting behaviors. If you ignore the behavior you don't want to see and pay attention to those that you do, you are likely to see more of the desired behavior.

Use appropriate body language. Make sure your body and your mouth are on the same page. If you are communicating concern and empathy verbally, but your body is not making the same statement, the child is likely to interpret your message as negative. How you stand and hold your arms, as well as the expression on your face, tells a lot about how you are feeling.

Don't take it personally. Remember, this is not really about you. Typically, we are pulled into a power struggle when we start taking the conflict personally. You have to remind yourself that the child doesn't really know you and that he or she is not your peer. It is also important to remember that he or she is

not your child and might not have the same code of conduct you would impart to your own children.

Make an appointment. When a situation becomes heated it might be best to delay the conversation until later. It is appropriate to tell the child "we will deal with this later; as soon as I finish this lesson you and I can discuss what is happening." It is best to set an actual time for that discussion. Just saying "we'll talk about it later" sounds as if you are putting the child off.

Maintain maneuverability. Be careful not to paint yourself into a corner with absolute statements or threats that you can't follow through with. Such behaviors only increase the probability of a power struggle and create a more drastic situation to deal with.

Listen and empathize. Rather than reacting to a student's challenge, a teacher can listen and return an empathetic response. The student will become more responsive if the teacher can communicate genuine concern. Listening and making a comment on the child's frustration level will better serve to de-escalate the situation.

Involve the student in the solution. Allowing the child to have a voice in the situation grants a sense of power. When the student feels empowered he or she is less likely to continue to resist authority. A discussion with the child about possible outcomes will help develop a sense of ownership and involvement for the child.

Concentrate on positive behavior. Rather than only noticing what is going poorly, a child who is acting out often responds to the identification of what is going well. Spending more time focusing on the positive behaviors than the negative ones reinforces the idea that these are the behaviors of which you would like to see more.

Maintain a benevolent outlook. The more you can identify the situation as being beyond the control of the child, the less you are likely to take it personally. Once the behavior is identified as purposeful and directed at you, your reactions will escalate. Remember, instead, that the child is struggling, and this really isn't about you.

Offer a face-saving way out. When people are locked in conflict they often need a way out without looking bad. Children especially are unable and unwilling to admit when they have been wrong. Giving the student a way out of the situation that doesn't embarrass him or her in front of peers will often eliminate the conflict.

Use choice statements. Presenting options to the student also gives him or her a sense of ownership and responsibility. Statements such as, "You can finish those two questions, and then we'll talk, or you can continue to yell and go to the office" lets the child know that he or she is responsible for his or her behavior and the consequence.

Speak privately. Eliminating the audience gives the child the opportunity to act without worrying what others are thinking. A student will often continue to act inappropriately because he or she doesn't want to lose face. Often, it helps to speak with the child in a location away from others.

Speak calmly. Keeping your voice in a low, calm pitch helps in many ways. It communicates that you are in control of yourself, not allowing the child to be in control. It also sets the tone for how communication will continue. If you get excited or loud, the child will generally respond in a like manner.

Use proximity. The right distance is important. Some children will feel threatened if you get too close, for others it helps calm the situation. The key is to know the child and respond accordingly. If you sense that your presence is actually exciting the child, then move further away. If, however, you feel that the child is responding positively to your presence, than a hand on the shoulder might even be helpful.

Speak respectfully. Even when a child has not been acting or talking in a respectful way, it is helpful to model respect. A child who is starting to escalate will see it as permission to continue if the teacher communicates in a disrespectful manner.

Establish eye-level position. If the child is standing or sitting, you want to try to be at the same level. When a child is sitting, lower yourself so you are looking eye-to-eye. This takes the threatening posture out and allows for a more even level of communication.

Stick with the problem at hand. Often we bring up other offenses when a child has pushed us to the limit. Reacting only to what is happening at the time will help to eliminate undue conflict. Be careful not to "gunny sack" (store up your reactions only to let them all happen at once). Deal with what is going on at the present. This is not the time for a conference on classroom behavior.

Acknowledge cooperation. When the child has been cooperative in any fashion be sure to acknowledge it. This will help the child to see that you are not just "looking" for what he/she is doing wrong.

Withdraw from the escalated situation. Especially when the conflict has become heated, the best thing to do might be to withdraw. Either invite someone else to handle the conflict or put it off until later. When two people become embattled, there is sometimes no immediate answer. The best thing to do is to back away from the conflict. This is especially true if the situation is becoming unsafe.

Interject a teaching pause. Just a pause in a statement can communicate awareness and expectation. Stopping for just a few seconds and looking in the direction of the student lets him or her know that you don't approve of the behavior and that you expect it to stop.

Use signals, nonverbal communication. A signal or gesture that is identified in advance can be a powerful way to stop a behavior without having to draw everyone's attention to it verbally. Even a finger to the lips is a universal way to ask someone to be quiet.

Slip a note. Another way to communicate without drawing a lot of attention to the behavior is to slip the child a note. The note might direct the child back to the lesson, tell the child to wait his or her turn, or ask the child to stay seated.

Try a voice change. A change in the pitch or tone of the voice will draw the student's attention back and create emphasis. This certainly doesn't have to be a voice that is louder or more forceful. It is often more effective to speak quietly and calmly.

Drop a name. Sometimes just stating a child's name in the middle of a statement draws him or her away from the distraction and back to the task at hand.

Use a double distracter. If you can distract the child away from the first distracter, you get to choose which distraction is better for the classroom. Making a funny statement or doing something for emphasis helps to draw the child's attention away from the distraction and back to you.

Use "I" Messages. Using "I" Messages can be very powerful. Rather than talking about the student and the behavior you are actually talking about your reaction and needs. This helps to keep the child from becoming defensive and allows him or her to listen to your needs.

Acknowledge the student's power. The reality is that you can't control anyone. Recognizing this and communicating to the child that he or she is actually in control of his or her behavior can communicate power and responsibility.