

Proactive classroom Management

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Dealing with student misbehavior is one of the most daunting challenges facing today's teachers. It is ultimately the key to improving students' academic performance.

Positive classroom management cannot be left to chance. It pays great dividends to be proactive from the very first day, investing the time and energy in building positive relationships with your students. You have a personal "psychological bank account" with each student. You cannot make withdrawals if you don't make deposits (which we do when we do the little things that create personal relationships).

Teachers do influence the behaviors of the students—both positively and negatively. Some teachers are more effective at positive classroom management than others. Think of those teachers from your early schooling whom you fondly remembered. What were they doing right? We can learn much from these exemplary teachers.

There is more to effective classroom management than merely bullying or intimidating students into reluctant compliance. After all, you expect students to behave properly even when you are not standing over them. We want to teach responsibility that transfers beyond the classroom door.

Nothing helps nurture positive student behavior better than an engaging and meaningful lesson. Students are certainly more attentive, motivated, and helpful when they perceive the content to somehow relate to their lives. Certainly we must deal with inappropriate behavior, but we can do so in a manner that treats our students with decency and respect.

This chapter features practical strategies that successful teachers have employed in teaching students at all grade levels.

ESTABLISHING RULES

Research suggests that effective teachers are in control of their classrooms but not obsessed with the idea of control. A necessary (though not sufficient) first step in establishing standards of acceptable behavior in a classroom is to set some norms or rules of conduct.

- Some teachers prefer to involve students in the rule-setting process the first day of class. The class meeting as advocated by William Glasser, founder of control theory and reality therapy, can be an effective device for involving students and gaining their commitment to the rules they set.
- Most effective teachers establish a few, positively stated rules, for example:
 - Ask permission before using others' things.
 - Bring your materials and books to class.

- Only one person should talk at a time.

“Theories and goals of education don’t matter a whit if you do not consider your students to be human beings”. —Lou Ann Walker

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- Always be on time.
- Complete and turn in all assignments.
- Respect others’ rights.
 - The maximum number of enforceable rules seems to be around five to seven. Many classrooms function very well with only three or four rules.
 - It is important to establish your own set of rules, based on your needs and experience, your students’ maturity, and the school climate.
 - Don’t try to cover every possible unacceptable behavior; you aren’t writing a penal code. On the other hand, don’t be so vague that no one really knows what the rule means.
 - Motivation to comply with rules seems highest when they are stated positively. When possible, convey what you do want to happen rather than trying to list all the possible unacceptable behaviors.
 - It is essential the first day not to let behaviors slide that are clear violations. Enforcing a higher standard once you have tolerated a lower standard of behavior becomes very difficult. It is easier to start out a bit firm and ease up later.
 - Early in the year, hold a class discussion on students’ rights in your classroom. Solicit ideas from your students as to what is a right and which ought to be accorded all students. Examples might include the right to make mistakes or the right to express one’s opinion. Focus the discussion on the responsibilities that must accompany any right (for example, the responsibility to learn from our mistakes).
 - Construct or let a student volunteer construct a poster listing the class rules. Display it prominently to remind students of the rules. It is imperative that every student know your rules.
 - It does little good to establish rules if you have no plan for enforcing them. Your plan should in some fashion provide encouragement and reinforcement for students complying with the rules as well as some penalty or consequence for those who choose to violate the class rules.
 - If you find it necessary to add a new rule later in the year, do so. Dr. Harry Wong, an expert on classroom management, suggests replacing an old rule with the new one. The old one can become an unwritten rule or expectation.
 - Of course, honor school or district rules beyond those established for your classroom (for example, restrictions on drug use, weapons in the school, attendance policies). You are responsible for knowing and enforcing these. If you don’t know them, ask for a copy of the teacher or student handbook. Post these rules and assure that all students know them. You can be held legally liable if you fail to enforce them.
 - There is no substitute for consistently and fairly enforcing your class rules. Doing so assures some predictability in the students’ learning environment.
 - Allow students to role play scenarios in which rules might be violated. Present several hypothetical situations for small groups or individuals to role play. Encourage them to resolve the dilemma by practicing a behavior that does not break the rules. They learn by seeing others model appropriate responses and also by practicing responsible behaviors. Examples might include the following:

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- Brenda asks to copy your homework to hand in as hers.
- Jake trips and accidentally pushes you from behind.
- Brooke slips on a wet spot and falls while returning from the pencil sharpener. Other students begin to laugh at him and call him names.
- Shoving breaks out between two students arguing over who was first in line.
- The student seated behind you pokes you with a pencil.
- The classroom routines and procedures you establish at the beginning of the year convey your standards and expectations. They help you get things done in an orderly manner. Such informal rules or expectations complement your formal rules.

THIRTY HOT TIPS FOR MANAGING CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR

The ability to manage students' behavior is the number one concern of beginning teachers, and it is near the top for most experienced teachers. Indeed, the ability to develop harmonious, mutually respectful relationships with students is one of the best predictors of who will survive in the teaching profession. The inability to effectively manage students' behavior accounts for more teacher dismissals than any other cause, including lack of knowledge of subject matter. Here are some tips on effective classroom management gleaned from research and observations of effective teachers.

1. Invest in relationship building from the beginning, nurturing in your "psychological bank account" with your students. Remember the adage "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." This does not mean you should try to be their buddy. It does mean treating each student with dignity and respect. Show interest in their lives as you chat before and after class. Sure, it takes time; but much of the success of outstanding teachers, such as Jaime Escalante, the celebrated real-life model for the film *Stand and Deliver*, can be understood in terms of the caring relationship they developed with their students. It is a case of "You can pay me now or pay me later": you'll either spend time now building a mutually respectful relationship or spend it later in a classroom power struggle. If you've made regular deposits to the psychological bank account, you can make withdrawals later when you ask students to comply with your demands. They'll also be more likely to forgive your mistakes than to capitalize on them.
2. Expect some students to test you to determine the boundaries of acceptable behavior and your competency to respond. Although such tests are usually minor infractions (whispering, note passing, and so on), they constitute a challenge to your classroom control. It is essential to react immediately, calmly, and appropriately to these infractions; but it is vital not to overreact.
3. Preserve your classroom momentum at all costs. Momentum means that every student is on task and the lesson is rolling along smoothly. Most discipline problems do not occur during periods of momentum but rather during those periods of chaos—when something has broken the lesson's momentum. These classroom interruptions may sometimes be beyond your direct control: announcements over the P.A., a knock at the door, a fire engine passing the building, or the custodian riding by the window on a power mower. However, sometimes teachers may unwittingly break their own momentum: by not having the necessary audiovisual equipment ready, by hunting for misplaced items in the middle of the lesson, or by stopping to reprimand an offending student. Note what happens

when momentum is lost: the class goes from 95 or 100 percent on-task behavior to 0 percent on task. Now the teacher faces the challenge of refocusing everyone's attention and getting all students back on task. Pay special attention to making smooth, orderly transitions from one activity to another.

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4. It may sound cliché, but the best way to prevent classroom misbehavior is to deliver interesting, fast-paced, organized learning experiences, particularly ones that actively engage students in the lesson. A dull lesson is an invitation to misbehave. Much student acting out is simply a reaction to boredom. Though even the best, well-prepared teachers occasionally have behavioral infractions in their classroom, they are less frequent and less severe. Additionally, recapturing students' attention and getting them back on task is less difficult in a fast-paced classroom.
5. Be sure your rules and expectations are clear. Some teachers haven't given much thought to what they do want but only to what they don't want. Such negative focusing is inefficient. Don't assume students will correctly guess what you expect of them. Develop high expectations of your students for their academic performance, as well as their classroom conduct.
6. It is also better to have a few rather than many rules. Remember that you have to enforce them. You have a right to be in control of your classroom, but do not become obsessed with control. Rules should also be conspicuously displayed in the room.
7. Avoid causing students to lose face in front of their peers. Avoid needless public confrontations. You will almost always lose in the long run; kids can, and do, get even. Whenever possible, reprimand privately; avoid giving your perpetrator an audience.
8. Keep your eyes moving. Eye contact is your most powerful tool in maintaining classroom control. Probably 80 percent of potential classroom misbehaviors can be nipped in the bud through timely, direct eye contact. Keep your eyes moving to scan the entire room at least once every minute or less. You actually don't have direct eye contact with every single student every minute but rather focus on clusters of four or five students at a time. Hold that gaze for four or five seconds and then move on to another group. Remember that most teachers have less eye contact with students sitting in the farthest corners of the room, and that is exactly where most troublemakers choose to sit!
9. Continually monitor what is happening in your classroom. Some researchers refer to this as having eyes in the back of your head. Always know what's going on in your classroom. Avoid standing or sitting with your back to the class. For example, when working in a small group, sit so that you are facing the rest of the class. It is also difficult to monitor all of the class if you are sitting at your desk in front of the room. It is generally better to pace around the room during whole-class instruction. Effective teachers seem to develop a sixth sense in anticipating potential problems and appropriately intervening to nip them in the bud.

Practice the principle of escalation. This means you don't go after a fly with a baseball bat; if you have a small problem, use a small tool. If your initial strategy doesn't work, you can always escalate to a more potent strategy. You can always go up, but you can never effectively go down to a lower-level strategy if a more confrontational one does not work. Direct eye contact might be the lowest level of challenge. If the student does not correct his or her behavior, then escalate, perhaps by moving into his or her body space, standing near his or her desk. All of this can occur while you are still teaching the rest of the class, without directing everyone's attention toward the transgressing student. You've not broken your own momentum.

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Nine-tenths of education is encouragement.

—Anatole France

11. Use the power of silence. Follow your behavioral directives with a pause while maintaining direct eye contact. Silence is power; use it constructively. After giving each behavioral directive, pause and take two slow, deep breaths. Not only does this give the student time to comply, but the breathing also helps you to remain calm. You don't want to convey either fear or hostility. If you must escalate to the next level of confrontation, pause again for two deep breaths. Say no more than is absolutely necessary. Avoid haranguing or degrading the student. You'll only fuel resentment and create sympathy for the offender

among the rest of the class. You don't need to get drawn into a power struggle.

12. Don't overreact. When you lose your composure in front of the class, they, not you, are in control of your behavior. Some students will test you to discover your "hot buttons," the behaviors that cause you to lose control. Also remember that most of the things students do in our classrooms to annoy us are not evil, dastardly deeds. They are simply inappropriate, not acceptable in that situation. Of course, if a student's misbehavior is potentially harmful to others or destructive of property, then we must employ the necessary strategy to deter that behavior. This might mean getting immediate help from other adults. When you correct a student's behavior, don't dwell excessively. Nagging will only alienate the student.
13. Develop selective hearing. Learn to ignore some minor infractions, particularly when you suspect that the student's motive is to bait you into a confrontation. Of course, potentially harmful or disruptive outbursts must be handled. Even things that are ignored during class can be dealt with after class. This also is a way to buy time if you're not sure what to do about a behavior.
14. Divide and conquer. If you have two or three people who sit next to each other and frequently collude to disrupt the classroom, rearrange the classroom seating arrangement to separate the offenders. Sometimes this can be done subtly without revealing your true intent. For example, in forming groups you can count off so that the perpetrators are in different groups. As you assign groups to different areas of the room, you can assure that the troublesome ones are seated as far apart as possible.
15. Never argue with a student in front of the class. Decline to argue the issue now, but offer to discuss it privately with the student later. Public arguments inevitably lead to one of you losing face in front of the class. Either way, you lose! Students who lose face in front of their peers do get even.
16. Quiet reprimands are much more effective than loud ones. Indeed, some research suggests that loud reprimands are actually more disruptive. Avoid shouting at students! It reveals your loss of control. However, your tonality and nonverbal cues must be congruent. If your body language is too nonassertive, students will receive a mixed message that you aren't really serious.
17. When you do discuss a student's misbehavior, make it clear that you find the behavior, not the student, unacceptable. Remain firm yet compassionate. If possible, praise what they do well, but encourage improvement in their erroneous ways.

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18. Understand the school's student behavior code. What disciplinary measures are to be taken for serious infractions (for example, fighting, drugs, alcohol, truancy)? What is the procedure for reporting such problems? Is in-school suspension or detention used? If so, how? How are parents involved in correcting misbehavior?
19. Early in the year, develop classroom routines. Carefully explain how students are to handle the details of daily classroom activities: taking attendance, procedures for making up missed work, distributing and collecting materials, going to the bathroom, leaving for lunch, and so on.
20. Be cautious of touching students when they are very angry. This can stimulate a violent response in some students.
21. Be aware of students' occasional concealment (for example, covering their mouths when whispering, hiding behind their desks, standing books on edge to hide other reading material). Moving about the classroom discourages such strategies.

22. Avoid branding a student a failure because of one mistake. Help your students recognize that we all make mistakes but also have a responsibility to learn from our mistakes.
23. Avoid punishing the whole class for one student's misbehavior. It is simply unfair, and the innocent students will perceive it that way. It will only turn the whole class (and probably their parents) against you.
24. Try to find acceptable means for students to receive the attention and approval they often seek through misbehavior. Provide an opportunity for them to earn the spotlight through appropriate behavior.
25. Always have a couple of "sponge" activities (for example, small-group brainstorm, word puzzle, or review game) available to use when the unexpected happens (the projector bulb burns out, a visitor comes to the door, or a student becomes ill in class) or when some students complete seatwork or tests ahead of others.
26. Don't be too quick to send students to the principal's office or to call their parents. If done too frequently, this suggests that you have a problem with classroom management. Involve others only for serious or persistent misbehavior.
27. Don't send students out into the hallway as a punishment. Aside from potential liability problems, many students find the hall a pretty exciting place to be, especially if the class is boring.
28. For persistent, serious problems with a student, use the private teacher-student conference. Explain without blaming exactly what behaviors you find inappropriate and why. Avoid verbally attacking the student, and do listen to his or her view. Push the student for a plan for correcting the behavior in the future and making a commitment to follow through with that plan.
29. If you feel overwhelmed by a student's challenging behavior, don't be afraid to consult other professionals: your principal, experienced teachers, school psychologist, or counselor. They have likely confronted the same problems. Ask several persons for a variety of opinions. Allow yourself to learn from their mistakes and successes. A secondary benefit is that they will probably be flattered that you came to them for advice.
30. There are a few nationally marketed programs on effective classroom management. Performance Learning Systems' Classroom Management course (www.plsweb.com/) is an excellent example. If you are having difficulty managing student behavior, find one of these courses being offered locally, often for graduate credit.