



First Month Classroom Rules That Work

Expert teachers recommend these five must-have rules for middle schoolers.

Rule #1: Respect Yourself and One Another

HERE'S WHY: “Demonstrating respect is the most important rule because all other rules branch out from that one,” says Jason Kries, social studies teacher in South Bound Brook, New Jersey. “A student who respects himself takes responsibility for his actions and is thoughtful toward his classmates.” Respect likewise encompasses plagiarism, wearing appropriate attire, interacting with teachers, and, when hitting a bump in the road, taking action to improve. “We discuss respect on the first day of school to set the tone for the entire year,” Kries says.

GETTING IT RIGHT: Remember the axiom “praise in public, correct in private.” Call attention to a student who opens

the door for another, for example, or actively listens during a lively conversation. If a student shows disrespect, however, “talk to them individually after class,” says Marika Dietsch, a language arts teacher in Livingston, New Jersey.

Rule #2: The Classroom Is a Safe Zone

HERE'S WHY: “We want school to be a place where every student can ask a question or challenge an answer without being attacked,” says Lisa Butynes, a math teacher in South Bound Brook. Early in the year, Butynes models complimenting one another as well as disagreeing in a constructive way. “When students feel a rapport with each other, the learning is much richer,” she says. **GETTING IT RIGHT:** “Kids really respond to direct praise,” says Dietsch. You might say something like, “Liz, I’m impressed by the way you listened to Madison even though you disagree. Thanks for waiting your turn and for supporting your reasoning with facts.”

Rule #3: Take Initiative

HERE'S WHY: Advocating for oneself is an important part of development for middle schoolers. For instance, if a

student is absent, she should download any handouts she missed from the classroom website or call a classmate to catch up. Developing this habit now will help students in the long run. **GETTING IT RIGHT:** On the first day, tell students they each have an A. “It then becomes their responsibility to maintain that grade by doing their homework, participating in class, and asking for help when needed,” explains Butynes.

Rule #4: Use Technology Appropriately

HERE'S WHY: Kids are more plugged in than ever, but technology often prevents them from tuning into language arts with the same fervor. Address appropriate uses of technology in the beginning of the year so there is no confusion—“I thought we could text as long as the sound was off!”—and adhere to your school policy regarding cell phones.

GETTING IT RIGHT: Always repeat the same thing when you confiscate a phone, such as “Charlie, you’re disrespecting your classmates. Please give me your phone.” Establish this early on so when you’re enforcing the policy, you can remind the student that it’s not personal; you’re just adhering to a set rule.

Rule #5: Value Both Process and Product

HERE'S WHY: Many students don’t understand that engagement in every step—from the class discussions to the homework assignments—is what leads to success at the end of the marking period. “It’s important to recognize various processes and methods,” says Butynes. “The learning is much more valuable when students have to explain and defend their ideas.”

GETTING IT RIGHT: Make following directions and engagement in the learning process part of students’ grades, be it through weekly notebook checks or partial credit for logical thinking on a test even when the final answer is wrong. “Putting your money where your mouth is” will show kids the importance of engaging in every step of the process.

—*Jessica E. Rosevear*