

Creating a Climate for Learning: Effective Classroom Management Techniques

"The most important action an effective teacher takes at the beginning of the year is creating a climate for learning."
-- Mary Beth Blegan, former U.S. Department of Education teacher-in-residence

Included: Twelve teacher-tested tips for behavior management!

According to Fred Jones' Positive Classroom Discipline, "The most widespread management technique at home and in the classroom is *nag, nag, nag*."

It's also probably the least effective.

How can you avoid making that technique your own and create a "climate for learning"? This week, Education World looks to the experts -- teachers who've "been there, done that" and found a better way -- for answers.

Howard Miller, Associate Professor of Education at Lincoln University (Jefferson City, Missouri) suggests 12 steps teachers can take at the beginning of the year to promote effective classroom management.

1. Develop a set of written [expectations](#) you can live with and enforce.
2. Be consistent. Be consistent. Be consistent.
3. Be patient with yourself and with your students.
4. Make parents your allies. Call early and often. Use the word "concerned." When communicating a concern, be specific and descriptive.
5. Don't talk too much. Use the first 15 minutes of class for lectures or presentations, then get the kids working.
6. Break the class period into two or three different activities. Be sure each activity segues smoothly into the next.
7. Begin at the very beginning of each class period and end at the very end.
8. Don't roll call. Take the roll with your seating chart while students are working.
9. Keep all students actively involved. For example, while a student does a presentation, involve the other students in evaluating it.
10. Discipline individual students quietly and privately. Never engage in a disciplinary conversation across the room.
11. Keep your sense of perspective and your sense of humor.
12. Know when to ask for help.

A PARENT/STUDENT/TEACHER COMPACT

John Sipp, a Title 1 Specialist at Rocky Heights Elementary School in Hermiston, Oregon, says teachers there have found that rules are most effective when teachers, parents, and students are equally committed to upholding them. At the start of each school year, a compact spelling out their specific responsibilities is signed by each of the parties involved. Sipp has been kind enough to share that compact with Education World. The text of the compact follows.

As a parent/guardian, I will:

- Show respect and support for my child, the teachers, and the school.
- Support the school's discipline policy.
- Provide a quiet, well-lit place for study and supervise the completion of homework.
- Attend parent-teacher conferences.
- Talk with my child each day about his or her school activities.
- Monitor my child's TV viewing.
- Assist with at least one school or classroom activity.
- Read with my child for at least 10 minutes each day and let my child see me read.

As a student, I will:

- Always try to do my best work.
- Be kind and helpful to my classmates.
- Show respect for myself, my school, and other people.
- Obey classroom, school, and bus rules.
- Show respect for property by not stealing or vandalizing.
- Come to school prepared with my homework and my supplies.
- Believe that I can and will learn.
- Spend at least 15 minutes each day studying or reading at home.
- Talk with my parents each day about my school activities.

As a teacher, I will:

- Show respect for each child and for his or her family.
- Make efficient use of learning time.
- Provide a safe and comfortable environment that's conducive to learning.
- Help each child grow to his or her fullest potential.
- Provide meaningful and appropriate homework activities.
- Provide necessary assistance to parents so they can help with assignments.
- Enforce school and classroom rules fairly and consistently.
- Supply students and parents with clear evaluations of progress and achievement.
- Use special activities in the classroom to make learning enjoyable.
- Demonstrate professional behavior and a positive attitude.

Now, hand in hand, we will work together to carry out this contract.

Signed:

Parent signature/date

Student signature/date

Teacher signature/date

REWARDS AND CONSEQUENCES

But once you've established rules and procedures, how do you avoid nagging? Many experts recommend a system of rewards and consequences to encourage students to stay on task and on their best behavior. Here are some ideas that have been tried successfully -- straight from the teachers who use them. These ideas were posted over the last year on a variety of listservs; all posters were contacted for permission to use their ideas.

1. **Sybil Humphries:** I saw a great reward system in use this year while I was observing a second-year teacher. The teacher had a kitchen timer and each time the class started to get unruly or loud, or took too much time getting settled, she held up the timer and said, "The timer is on." When the students got themselves settled, she stopped the timer and recorded the number of seconds it took on the chalkboard. At the end of each calendar month, she added up the time and subtracted it from 15 minutes. The class got to decide on a special activity for the amount of time that was left.
2. **Laura Dowling:** I hand out four hall passes per term -- two bathroom passes and two locker passes. The students fill them out and keep them in their binders. They may use them when the need arises, but get no more chances after the passes are gone.
3. **Patti Fawver, Bristol (Wisconsin) School:** Each child in the class receives a "checkbook" with a specific amount of money -- say \$200 -- deposited in it. If a student doesn't complete a homework assignment, he or she might have to write a "check" for \$50. If a student breaks a classroom rule, perhaps he or she will owe \$25. You can use any behavior you'd like to encourage. At the end of the week, students purchase privileges based on the amount of money they have left.
4. **Gretchen Lee (San Jose, CA):** One technique I use with my 6th and 7th graders is to bring in a stopwatch -- the bigger, the better. I announce that they're going to be given 2 minutes to talk. For every additional minute, they will lose 5 minutes of their lunch period. I start the stopwatch as soon as the students come in or any time during the day they when get out of hand. I just peer at it very dramatically until someone notices and calls out "She's timing!" I keep timing until they settle down. In the six years I've used it, I've rarely had to keep a class in for lunch more than once.
5. **Mary Haas, Professor of Educational Theory and Practice at West Virginia University:** If a particular class is very noisy or disruptive, you might try bringing in a tape recorder and placing it where it can be seen by the students. Turn the recorder on and record the class. You can use the recording in a number of ways: 1. Analyze it to find out who is causing the problem. 2. Give the class a quiz, see how they score, then let them hear the tape of the class and have them make suggestions to improve learning. 3. With your "evidence," talk to individual students or their parents.
6. **Andover Middle School (Wichita, KA):** Students at this school carry conduct cards. They accumulate points for such infractions as being tardy, chewing gum, being noisy in the halls, and not having their student agenda books. As the points increase, the color of the card goes from blue to green to yellow to red, and the consequences increase from a half-hour detention to in-school suspension, then to long-term suspension and, finally, to expulsion.
7. **Lorie Schaefer (Seeliger Elementary School; Carson City, Nevada):** The system I used with 3rd graders was this: I placed their desks in pods of 4-5 and designated each pod by a color. On the chalkboard, I kept a weekly chart with tally marks for each group. Throughout the week I rewarded the groups with tally marks for quiet work, cleaning up, cooperation, whatever. At the end of the week, I rewarded the group with the most points with a small treat.
8. **Ellie Depew:** When you've had a successful day with students on task, reserve the last 10 or 25 minutes for games. (If you like, you can gradually work to a game once a week.) Winners can be rewarded with points or small prizes. The trick is that they have to earn this activity, and one person's misbehavior can cause the rest of the class to forfeit it. Of course, the games should reflect your subject matter.
9. **Sally Gill (Kingston Primary School, Tasmania, Australia):** Over the past six years, I've run a very effective program in my class. Each child carries a card on which he or she records stamps awarded for great work, wonderful ideas, manners, friendliness, bringing things from home, anything. When they get 5 stamps, they can trade the card in for a treat. These "treats" are agreed upon at the beginning of the term and might include an item from the treat bag, permission to change seats, game time with a friend, or extra art or computer time. If a student breaks a class rule, he or she is given an X on the card. If a student gets two X's, I contact the parents. Three X's result in an after school detention. The good news is that students can trade in 3 stamps and eliminate one X! I teach 11 and 12 year olds and it works like a dream.
10. **Judith Auslander:** I issue a Chance ticket to each student in my 5th grade class who brings in homework on time. When a student receives 10 Chance tickets, he or she is awarded special time with the teacher -- such as lunch in the classroom. A student who accumulates 15 tickets, gets a Homework Coupon, which can be redeemed for a selected homework assignment.
11. **Susan Wailes (Texas):** Buy 2 yardsticks and paint them in graduated amounts in these colors: green (about 12"), yellow (about 8"), red (about 4"), and black (about 4"). Hang the yardsticks in your classroom where they are visible to students. The colors represent grades for conduct and completing work. (Green=excellent, yellow=above average, blue=satisfactory, red=needs improvement, black=unsatisfactory.) Then buy a bag of clothespins and write each

child's name on 2 clothespins with a black marker. At the beginning of the week, each child's clothespin is clipped to the green part of the yardstick. If homework is not completed, the clothespin on the 'Completing Work' yardstick is moved down one increment. If a student talks too much or disobeys a classroom rule, the clothespin on the 'Conduct' yardstick is moved down. When a clothespin reaches the red area, that student misses recess for the remainder of the week. When a clothespin reaches the black area, the student's parents are notified. For rewards, each child has a 3"x4" card. When a student is "caught being good," the edge of his or her card is punched with a heart-shaped holepunch. Students use their cards to buy things from their teacher. For example, lunch with the teacher might "cost" 30 punches, bringing a boombox to recess is 25 punches, wearing a hat in class is 10 punches, and a pencil or eraser costs 5 punches. The items are all free or inexpensive and the kids love it when we have a "Punch Sale."

12. **Lindemarie Crawford, South Middle School, Morgantown, West Virginia:** In the middle school I teach at, all classrooms are part of the Responsible Student Program (RSP). Under that program, students receive "violations" for not fulfilling the written plan for responsibility:

- Being prepared -- coming to class with all necessary materials.
- Being respectful of others -- includes verbal respect, not disrupting the learning environment, and proper etiquette.
- Being prompt.

Each team decides how many violations they can receive before losing the nine-week reward. The nine-week rewards, determined by the team, can include a pizza party, class picnic, free time, a video, and so on. In addition, at the 6th grade level we give a weekly reward of 20-25 minutes of free time each Friday for students reaching weekly goals. Students who do not earn rewards must stay in a monitored classroom. Students soon learn that responsibility and respect have their rewards!

MINUTE-BY-MINUTE MONITORING

Of course, the most frequently used management techniques are those that prevent small problems from escalating into big ones. Many classroom incidents can be prevented by a simple technique suggested by Hartford, Connecticut, teacher Robert Bencker. Bencker, who teaches at an inner city alternative high school program, suggests that teachers set the tone for the day by greeting each student personally as he or she enters the classroom. Use the opportunity, he says, to establish rapport, and to deal with such minor problems as gum chewing, boisterous behavior, bad moods, or unwanted materials, quietly and discretely -- before they can erupt into public confrontations that threaten control and disrupt the class.

But don't stop there. Once students are in the classroom, you'll want to continue with some of these teacher-recommended techniques for maintaining control without confrontation:

- Establish eye contact.
- Move around the room and increase proximity to restless students.
- Send a silent signal.
- Give a quiet reminder.
- Re-direct a student's attention.
- Begin a new activity.
- Offer a choice.
- Use humor.
- Provide positive reinforcement.
- Wait quietly until everyone is on task.
- Ask a directed question.

And, when all else fails, try something else!

Creating a climate for learning is probably the most important -- and most difficult -- task a teacher faces, but it can be even more difficult for beginning teachers. As former U.S. Department of Education teacher-in-residence Mary Beth Blegan says, "Setting the classroom environment is key. For a new teacher that means pretending that you know what you're doing."

RESOURCES YOU CAN USE

- [What is Your Classroom Management Profile?](#) Includes a classroom management profile evaluation from Teacher Talk.
- [Optional Elements of a Discipline Plan](#) The information at this site discusses how to develop a personal discipline plan and includes a sample letter to notify parents of a discipline problem.

INFORMATIONAL RESOURCES

- [The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development](#) This site contains publications and resources for teaching and learning.
- [Positive Classroom Discipline](#) A commercial program that provides techniques for classroom management.
- [Tips for Creating a Peaceful Classroom](#) Helpful tips for teachers from Teacher Talk.
- [School Improvement Research Series \(SIRS\): Schoolwide and Classroom Discipline](#) A thorough discussion of school discipline issues and effective techniques.

The 12 teacher ideas posted above were originally posted to one of the three educational listservs below. An attempt was made to contact each teacher who posted an idea.

- [TeachTalk Listserv](#)
- [Middle-L Listserv](#)
- [Teacher-to-Teacher Listserv](#)

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