Developing An Environment Where Children Can Learn

(Classroom Management)

Helpful Hints Series #5
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An Introduction

Students spend most of their childhood in school and much of what they learn about adulthood happens in the school setting. Children learn by watching and interacting with those who teach them and those that discipline them. They learn how to relate to others and how to solve problems with people. They learn about their individuality and how others perceive them. They also learn about the responsibility of being part of a group and how to express their thoughts and feelings in appropriate ways. This situation places a great deal of responsibility and stress on teachers and those that closely monitor and interact with young people.

Many special education teachers are ready to “throw in the towel” and give up on students because they are burned-out from dealing with difficult children. Usually this attitude reflects the frustration of not being able to manage disruptive behaviors and therefore, not meet the unique needs of the class. Teaching and meaningful learning can only take place when the environment has been structured in such a manner that students feel safe, are cooperative, and enjoy learning. So the reflective teacher needs to ask, what are the necessary steps to be taken to build a positive learning environment that encourages student cooperation? The teacher also needs to understand their role in the classroom and when to involve other professionals to support student learning and behavior.

Classroom management begins before a teacher ever enters the classroom. Having a positive attitude and a self-reflective style of teaching contributes to developing a learning environment that promotes active student participation in learning. Knowing yourself and feeling comfortable with the decisions you have made to develop a positive learning environment supports student success. Building a successful classroom environment takes planning. Some specific suggestions include:

• Be reflective regarding the type of classroom environment you wish to establish.
• Provide a minimum set of rules.
• Post the rules with consequences and rewards.
• Allow students, to the best of their ability, to participate in developing the rules.
• State the rules in a positive manner.
• Have realistic expectations. Rules need to be made so that they can be followed. For example, “No talking,” as a rule is impossible to enforce.
• Make sure students understand and recognize proper behavior.
• Practice following the rules.
• Ignore some behaviors. Utilize proximity to student to control rather than verbal responses for minor infractions.
• Get involved when physical or emotional harm is eminent, behavior is disruptive to others, or behavior may escalate to a more serious situation.
• Provide positive praise and attention often.
• Get help from colleagues when necessary.

Allowing students to develop responsibility for themselves is a key factor in building a successful learning environment. Teachers can support students in this effort by the following.

• Providing choices for students. Example: Complete the even or the odd problems on this page in your math book.
• Providing predetermined consequences. Don’t surprise students with a disciplinary measure. They need to know the consequences before hand.
• Be flexible and fair.
• Be consistent in all situations.
• Have a good sense of humor.
• Teach and practice problem-solving techniques.
• Speak to students in a supportive and respectful manner.

Dealing with Difficult Children

The final word on how to control aggressive or troubled children is by no means available, however, there are specific strategies that can be utilized to reduce and manage those students who have extreme behavior issues.

The teacher can optimize the anxious child’s learning by keeping the number of evaluative situations to a minimum by employing the following strategies:

• Provide easy tasks in which failure and criticism are unlikely.
• Provide opportunities for successful completion of tasks.
• Provide multiple opportunities to learn task.
• Remove time limits to complete tasks until child is secure in task.
• Provide choices.
• Be calm and supportive.
• Intercede before a crisis occurs.

It is imperative that the teacher’s response to inadequate performance does not in any way convey the attitude that failure and being personally liked by the teacher are related or linked together. Students need to feel supported by the teacher. After some time the support the student experiences will build into a feeling of trust and respect for the teacher and a greater willingness to take educational risks.

While we can be optimistic that we are doing a good job with regards to discipline in our schools, there is always room for improvement. By planning effectively on a school-wide bases teachers can feel supported and influence the future success for all students at their school site. An effective school-wide plan for discipline includes clear rules and multiple interventions when the rules are not followed. Research has identified the following processes to be effective in implementing a school-wide discipline program.

• Let the students know what you need. Develop clear and specific guidelines that define the rules and consequences.
• Provide instruction at levels that match the students’ ability. If you are unable or unwilling to adapt your teaching style to lower or higher academic levels based upon student’s needs, then you are offering the students a valid excuse for acting out.
• Listen to your students. Learn how to identify with students who have negative feelings and convey support and understanding through reflective or active listening.
• Use humor. Many frustrating and potentially explosive situations can be lightened by learning
how to poke fun at yourself and by avoiding defensiveness. Do not use sarcasm as a weapon to control students.

• Vary your style of presentation. Research has shown that average older students have an attention span of 15 minutes and younger children 10 minutes. Therefore, we need to get kids to be actively involved in the learning process.
• Offer choices Students should be given a choice and must be helped to see that consequences are a result of their choices.
• Refuse to accept excuses. Accepting excuses teaches students to be irresponsible. If legitimate excuses are accepted state so clearly before an incident occurs.
• Legitimize some misbehavior. Think of creative ways to legitimize some inappropriate behavior. For example, if students are always complaining, have a gripe session or provide a “gripe box” in which students can air their complaints.
• Use hi-five to communicate with students. A pat on the back, a handshake or hug can go a long way toward establishing bonds with students.
• Be responsible. You are responsible to come to work on time, present your subject in an interesting fashion, return work with meaningful comments in reasonable time, provide special help, accommodate and modify curriculum and act in a professional manner.
• Realize that you might not reach all students. Some students, no matter how hard you try to intervene, choose failure because they may need more than you can provide. Look for alternative placement or get help, but don’t take it personally that you have failed.
• Start fresh every day. What happened yesterday is finished. Do not hold grudges. Today is a new beginning for everyone. A new chance to be successful and happy.
• Use your resources. Get the help you need to provide a successful learning environment for all students.
• Communicate with parents. Provide a daily, weekly or semester communication dialogue with parents. Involving the parents encourages student success.

Conclusion

Effective classroom discipline does not come from quick mastery of techniques or the implementation of a prepackaged methodology. Effective and meaningful discipline comes from the heart and soul of the teacher. It comes from the belief that teaching students to take responsibility for their behavior is as much part of the job of the teacher as teaching history or math and more important than simply enforcing rules. It also comes from the belief that all students need hope and the opportunity to work in a nurturing and supportive learning environment.

Optimizing Learning Experiences for Students

• Create a responsive learning environment with many opportunities for students to experience hands-on activities.
• Differentiate the content to meet the unique and varied needs and abilities of students.
• Utilize empowering language that encourages students to take risks and be productive without criticism.
• Respect, support and appreciate diversity in your classroom.
• Discourage competition and social comparisons that produce feelings of shame and guilt.
• Encourage students to show pride in their work by being optimistic and enthusiastic.
• Involve parents by encouraging follow through of specific useful strategies in the home setting.

The lessons learned in school are long lasting. We, therefore, have a great responsibility to develop the whole child. And this is why the management of student behavior cannot be viewed simplistically.
There is too much at stake. Take time to reflect and review your plan for classroom management. Your decisions affect the lives of your students for a lifetime.

More Suggestions

The following are some examples of rules to post in your classroom. Select a few simple rules that are appropriate for your students. Take into consideration the students’ ages and disabilities when developing rules.

- Come prepared for class.
- Follow directions.
- Stay on task.
- Keep hands, feet, and objects to yourself.
- Be kind and courteous to others.
- Be proud of your efforts.
- Take responsibility for yourself.
- Develop a positive attitude.

General Tips on Discipline

- Make your instructional activities and other classroom activities interesting, meaningful, and vital.
- Know your subject extensively, but do not make the mistake of thinking that the goal of teaching is to have your pupils learn all that you know about your subject.
- Know the fundaments of classroom management: seating, attendance, promptness in beginning work, being on time, lighting, ventilation and the flow of traffic through the classroom.
- Learn the student’s needs and issues. Understand the strategies necessary to compensate for their disability.
- Hold to standards that students understand and which they can meet.
- Give some thought to your own personal qualities: be firm, fair, sympathetic, patient, pleasant, calm, confident . . . be yourself.
- Dress neatly and professionally.
- Be willing to apologize to a pupil if you find that you have treated him/her unfairly.
- Control your temper. No yelling, screaming, or calling students inappropriate names.
- Be careful in punishing suspected misbehavior.
- Do not punish the whole class because of the misdeeds of a single of few offenders.
- Treat all students with respect.
- In punishing a pupil, do not make an issue of something that is trivial.
- Never reflect upon the parents or relatives or home training of individual students.
- Do not make a personal issue of behavior problems.
- Do not hold grudges or be vindictive of students. Everyone deserves another chance to be successful.
- Avoid threats.
- Do not assign schoolwork as punishment for misconduct.
- Make use of the school counselor or school psychologist.
- Identify the cause of the misconduct. The acting out is only a symptom.
- The best discipline is acting before a problem occurs or escalates.
- Retain your sense of humor.
- Remember that you are human. You cannot make everything all right for all students. It takes
time to change inappropriate behavior and replace it with socially acceptable behavior.

- There are no easy fixes. What works today may be ineffective tomorrow. You need to be flexible and creative in managing classroom behavior.