

Chapter One

CREATING RULES
WITH STUDENTS

BY MARY BETH FORTON

Children are far more
*invested in following rules that they help to create.
It's that simple.*

Gail Zimmerman, second grade teacher

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One

Purposes and Reflections

Walk into any classroom using the *Responsive Classroom* approach to discipline and one of the things you'll notice is a chart of three to five rules such as "Respect each other," "Take care of yourself," and "Take care with classroom property." Rather than listing all the possible dos and don'ts, these rules remind students in a global way of what they should do. Created with the students, these rules set limits and boundaries but do so in a way that fosters group ownership.

Recently I had a good reminder of why the rules in these classrooms are deliberately positive, broad, and few in number. I was at a retreat center that had long lists of rules posted everywhere. Don't leave the door open, don't leave the water running, don't move the furniture, don't make any long distance calls, don't, don't, don't. At first I felt nervous about these rules. *What if I don't remember? What if I break a rule without even knowing it?* Then I felt annoyed. *How can they expect me to remember all of these?* I even felt a bit rebellious. *I'll leave the water running if I feel like it. How would they know anyway?* Finally, there were so many rules posted in so many places that I just stopped paying attention.

Children, too, become overwhelmed or resentful when they are handed long lists of dos and don'ts. Many will decide they have license to do anything that isn't specifically prohibited: think of the all-too-familiar "But teacher, it doesn't say I can't...."

By contrast, rules that are few in number, global in scope, and created with children are likely to be respected. Challenging and guiding students to make good decisions, they become the cornerstone of classroom life.

Goals of creating rules *with* students

The goals of creating rules with students are to:

- Foster a sense of group ownership of the rules
- Establish guidelines and expectations for responsible behavior
- Create a sense of order and safety—both physical and psychological—in the classroom
- Teach children the purpose of rules in a democratic society

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Steps in creating rules with students

Rule creation takes place in the early weeks of school and does require an investment of time. However, teachers find over and over that the payoffs in increased student responsibility and decreased problem behaviors are well worth the effort.

The process involves the following steps:

1. Articulating hopes and dreams

The teacher asks students to share their goals for the school year, often beginning the conversation by sharing her/his own goals for the year. Families are also invited to share their goals for their child.

2. Generating rules

The teacher and children collaborate to generate rules that will allow everyone to achieve their hopes and dreams.

3. Framing the rules in the positive

The teacher works with students to turn the rules into positive statements.

4. Condensing the list down to a few global rules

The teacher and students work together to consolidate their long list of specific rules so they end up with three to five global classroom rules.

Having faith in children's abilities to make sense of the rules

To be successful in creating rules with students, teachers must have faith that children can make sense of the rules and *want* to follow them. In spite of all the alarming news reports about violence and irreverence in schools, it's important to keep in mind that most children, most of the time, want to and do follow the rules, especially rules they view as reasonable and fair.

Not only are children amenable to rules, they crave them. Rules give children a sense of security in an often confusing and unpredictable world. Even in the earliest grades, children can understand that rules are there to help them learn and grow. While they may sometimes resent following rules, especially in moments of anger or frustration, they can understand that rules help make their classroom a good place to be—a place that is safe, kind, and orderly.

William Damon, a developmental psychologist and author of *The Moral Child*, reminds us that “all children are born with a running start to moral development”—“a number of inborn responses predispose them to act in ethical ways.” Research over the past fifty years has repeatedly confirmed that children are born with a predisposition to what Damon labels the “four natural virtues: empathy, fairness, respect for others, and self-control.” While these early virtues are evident in most infants, Damon asserts, they either develop or stagnate depending on the social influences in a child's life. (Damon 1999)

Along with family, school is one of the most important of such social influences. As teachers, it's our job to help nurture the “four natural virtues.” Taking the time to create rules with students and expecting students to live by them is one way of doing that.

When rules make sense: A family story

When I was ten years old, something happened that helped me really understand the purpose of rules.

One day, a day not unlike most in a house filled with five energetic school-age children, my father became fed up with the way we all left trails of books, coats, shoes, papers, food, and toys in our wake. While the rules of the house were clear on this matter, more often than not we chose to ignore them, and no amount of nagging, cajoling, or reprimanding seemed to help. Eventually we would get around to picking things up or they would magically disappear overnight with a little help from our parents. But this day was different. This day

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my father decided that a new approach was needed. What was missing, he realized, was an appreciation for the rule itself.

He called us down to the living room and soberly announced that as of the next morning there would be no more rules about leaving books, toys, coats, food, etc., around the house. From now on, we could leave things anywhere we wanted and no one was going to pick them up. My two older siblings were a bit skeptical—my father had never done anything like this before—while the younger two jumped for joy. Dancing gleefully about the room, they wanted to know if they could start “throwing stuff all over the place right now” or whether they had to wait until morning.

It was an interesting week. No more nagging when we dropped our books and coats on the floor after coming home from school, no more reminders to clean up one game or art project before taking out another. We giggled as we deliberately abandoned plates of half-eaten snacks on the coffee table and dramatically dropped shoes and sports equipment in the middle of the living room floor. Freedom at last!

After several days the house became a total mess, every room and hallway littered with our things and our trash. The sense of order that we were so accustomed to was suddenly gone and we began to grow uneasy. We continued to play along but now it was with some apprehension. The novelty had worn off and we began to wonder when the game would stop.

Oddly our parents seemed not to notice. They calmly stepped over our debris as if it wasn't there, gently nudged a bag or toy to make their way up the stairs, silently moved a plate of crusty food to make room for their mug. In fact, they never said one word about the growing clutter in the house. Finally, after six days of this, we children couldn't stand it anymore. The chaos was beginning to interfere with our lives, not only making it hard to find things when we needed them but making it hard to feel any sense of order or stability. We begged our parents to end their silence and put the rules back in place.

What followed was the first meaningful discussion I had ever had about rules. *What should the rule be? Why do we need this rule? How should it be enforced?*

For the first time in my life it dawned on me that there was some rhyme and reason behind rules, that they actually served a real purpose and were there to help us, not to control or stifle or irritate us. What a revelation this was! And what a difference it made in my willingness to follow rules, at least the ones that made sense to me.

Getting Started

It's the first day of school and students walk into your classroom full of anxiety, uncertainty, and a million questions: *What will my new teacher be like? Will she be nice? Will she be in control? What do we do if we need to go the bathroom? Will the other kids be friendly? Do I have to stay at my desk? Will there be a lot of homework? What are the rules here?*

Like master detectives, the children search the classroom, the walls, the books, the teacher's tone of voice, the students' movements, for clues to answer these and other questions. What they want to know is what will reign in this place. Order or chaos? Kindness or cruelty? Calmness or confusion? Respect for materials or reckless abandonment?

By the end of the first few days, many students will have formed conclusions about what kind of year this will be. They'll know whether the teacher feels confident or shaky. They'll know whether the classroom feels friendly or mean. And they'll have a pretty good sense of whether they will be held to high academic and social standards.

We all need this kind of information in new situations. Whether we walk into a new job, a new neighborhood, or a new country, as social beings we need to know the customs and codes of conduct of our new environment. But children especially crave this kind of information, and they need it during the first few days of school.

The first priority: Establish a sense of calm and order

Before ever beginning a discussion of classroom rules, it's essential to create a sense of order, predictability, and trust in the classroom. From day one, teachers need to convey the message that in this classroom, respect, kindness, and learning will prevail. Students need to know in no uncertain terms that the teacher is in control and that the standards for behavior are high. This knowledge gives students a sense of physical and emotional security. It also frees them to participate in rule creation and other classroom activities in a meaningful way.

This point cannot be emphasized enough. Teachers who breeze over establishing order and jump too quickly to creating rules with students often find that the process backfires. When students don't feel safe, they won't invest in rule creation. The conversations become confusing, superficial, even farcical, with students challenging the process every step of the way: *Why are we making the rules? Isn't that your job? I don't care about the stupid rules. Let's make a rule that says we'll have no rules.*

So, how do teachers establish this crucial atmosphere during the early days of school? They explicitly introduce routines—all the basics from how to line up, to what’s expected at cleanup, to what to do if you finish your work early. They build a strong feeling of community and trust by taking steps to get to know students and to help students get to know each other. They take time. They go slowly. They do all this before delving into a full-blown curriculum.

The following are suggestions for some essential structures that should be in place before opening a conversation on rules.

(For a detailed discussion of how to create order, security, and community during the early weeks of school, refer to the book *The First Six Weeks of School* by Paula Denton and Roxann Kriete.)

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Establish signals for quiet

Students need to know from day one that the teacher has an effective and calm way—something other than yelling—to get their attention. This is not something that needs to be discussed and should never be negotiated. It is an absolutely essential tool for classroom management that should be established in a matter-of-fact way on the first day of school. The teacher might say, “There’ll be lots of times when I or someone else in the classroom needs to get your attention. Here are the signals we’ll use for that.”

The signals will vary depending on the age of the students, the location (indoors, outdoors, at the meeting area, etc.), and the style of the teacher. Some common examples include:

A visual signal such as the raising of a hand

This is used in whole-group meetings or other situations in which everyone can easily see the teacher or whoever needs the group’s attention. The person raises a hand. Children who see this may raise their hands as well to help spread the signal. Everyone in the group responds by becoming quiet and turning to the person who wants to speak. This person waits until everyone is paying full attention before beginning.

An auditory signal such as the ringing of a chime or a handclap

An auditory signal is most often used when children are spread out in the classroom. When the signal is given, everyone freezes and turns to the person who gave it. When finished speaking, the person says something like “You can melt” to signal that people can return to what they were doing.

Primary grade teachers often add the step of children folding their arms on their chest when they hear the signal. This helps younger children keep their hands “frozen” and away from tempting materials while listening to the speaker.

A louder auditory signal for outdoor use, such as blowing a whistle or shouting “Circle up!”

Both of these are effective for getting students’ attention when outdoors. In either case, the signal means the students should gather around the teacher for further instructions.

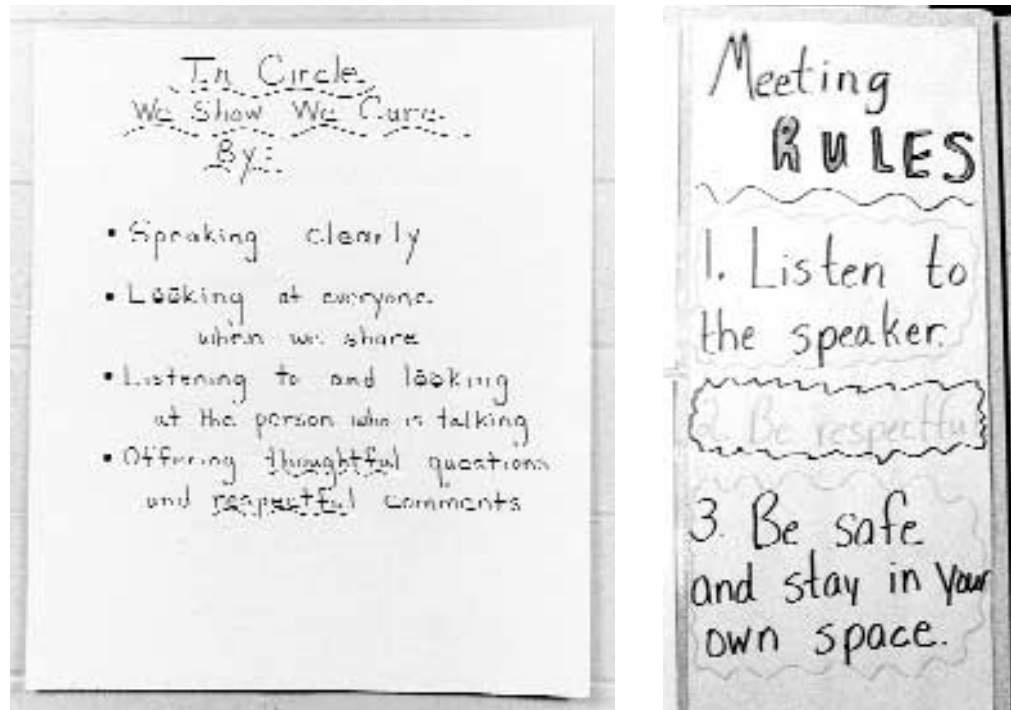
In establishing these signals, it’s important to be clear on exactly how they’ll be used and why. For example, if the goal is to get everyone’s attention and quiet, is it okay if students raise their hands when they see the teacher’s hand go up, but then continue to talk with a friend? Is it okay to freeze when the bell rings but not look at the person speaking? Is it okay to continue doodling as long as you’re looking at the person speaking? Why not? Children need clarity about these expectations and the reasons behind them. The more consistent, clear, and firm teachers are, the more useful the signals will be.

Many teachers spend time during the first few days of school practicing these signals. Younger students especially enjoy playing games of freezing and melting to the signal of the bell. During these practice sessions the teacher makes her/his expectations clear. The more specific and concrete, the better. For example: “Make sure both feet are firmly on the floor when you freeze”; “Freeze means freezing your mouth as well as your body”; “Remember to turn your body and eyes to the person who rang the bell”; “Put down anything in your hands when you freeze”; “Everyone stay frozen until the speaker says ‘You can melt.’”

A common question regarding the use of a signal for quiet is whether it’s necessary for all the students to raise their hands when the teacher raises hers/his. The answer is no. Raised hands do not automatically mean closed mouths or attentive listening. Unthinking obedience should never be the goal of a signal for quiet.

The important question is whether you get the response you want. If the children get quiet when you raise your hand or ring a chime or flick the lights, then the signal is working. If some children want to help by also raising their hands (or copying whatever other hand signal you use), that’s great. But it’s usually counter-productive to wait until every last child copies your signal before you speak.

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*Meeting guidelines in a first grade classroom (left)
and a fourth grade classroom (right)*

Name expectations for group discussions

If students are going to be involved in the rule-creation process, or have group conversations of any substance for that matter, they'll need to learn guidelines for doing this well. Many teachers introduce what they call "meeting guidelines" or "conversation guidelines" during the first week of school.

They might begin, "In our classroom, there'll be many times when we're having large group conversations. This might happen during Morning Meeting or during language arts or science time. It's important that everyone participates in these conversations and that we all feel our ideas are heard. What kind of meeting guidelines do you think we'll need to make that happen?"

Note that while the teacher asks students to construct the specific guidelines, s/he sets clear parameters for this task. Non-negotiable is the idea that the guidelines must support the goals of everyone participating in the conversations and all ideas being heard. With these goals in mind, students will likely construct meeting guidelines that look very similar to what adults would create for their own meetings:

- “Take turns.”
- “Raise your hand if you want to say something.”
- “Listen and show respect for each other’s ideas.”

If students frame a guideline in the negative such as “Don’t talk when someone is speaking,” the teacher asks them to reframe it in the positive: “So if we’re not going to talk while others are speaking, what should we be doing?”

Also, if there are essential guidelines that the teacher feels are missing, s/he can add them. For example, a teacher might say, “I know that if I’m talking and people are moving their bodies a lot or waving their hands to get called on, I get distracted. How about adding, ‘Keep your body still when someone is talking’ and ‘Wait until the person is finished talking before raising your hand?’”

Once the list seems complete, the teacher, working alone or with students, can create a final list of four or five guidelines that are then posted in the group meeting area. The teacher can refer students to these guidelines during group conversations, especially during the early weeks of school: “Our guideline says that we should listen when someone is talking” or “Remember we said we’d raise our hands if we want to say something during a meeting.”

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Begin each day with Morning Meeting

One of the most effective ways of building trust in the classroom is through a special kind of meeting: Morning Meeting, a fifteen- to thirty-minute whole-class gathering at the beginning of each day. This routine is simple, yet powerfully establishes a positive climate for learning, reinforcing academic and social skills, and giving students daily practice in showing respect, empathy, cooperation, and self-control. The meeting consists of four parts:

Greeting

Students greet each other by name. A variety of greetings can be used throughout the year, including ones that involve handshaking, singing, clapping, chanting, and using different languages. The important thing is that every student is acknowledged by name.

Sharing

Two or three students a day share information about an event in their lives. The rest of the class listens. Those who want to can offer empathic comments or ask clarifying questions.

Group activity

All students participate in a brief, lively activity, such as singing, reciting a poem, solving a math puzzle, dancing, miming, or playing a game.

News and announcements

The children read a news and announcements chart that the teacher has written. The chart lets children know of any special events coming up and usually includes a question, riddle, or on-paper activity that reinforces academic skills. Sometimes the class reads the chart aloud as a group. Sometimes they read it silently to themselves. Sometimes they follow along as the teacher reads it.

The type of greeting and activity, the content of the sharing, and the general flavor of the meeting may differ at different grade levels, at different points during the school year, and from teacher to teacher. But always, Morning Meeting includes these four basic components. The strength of Morning Meeting comes in large part from its predictability. No matter what the morning was like before children set foot in the classroom, once they come into the classroom, they can count on a friendly, respectful gathering, a time when they can get to know others and be known by others, a supportive routine for easing into the day.

Morning Meeting works as a form of proactive discipline because it satisfies children's need for a sense of significance, belonging, and fun. Much social science research has confirmed that in all human beings, behavior is motivated by these three intrinsic needs. Children will always strive to fulfill these needs. If they can't find positive or constructive ways to fulfill them, they'll seek unproductive and even destructive ways. Morning Meeting offers this all-important positive outlet. And it sets the tone for the rest of the day. As Roxann Kriete says, "Morning Meeting is a microcosm of the way we wish our schools to be—communities full of learning, safe and respectful and challenging for all" (Kriete 2002, 3).

For more about Morning Meeting, see *The Morning Meeting Book* by Roxann Kriete with contributions by Lynn Bechtel.

Reflect yourself on the purposes of rules

Why do we need rules in the classroom? For that matter, why do we need rules at all? While it seems a simple question with perhaps obvious answers, it's an essential one for teachers to ask themselves before inviting students into the process of articulating classroom rules.

Many of us have a love/hate relationship with rules. We know that rules are necessary for a well-functioning democracy and we wouldn't want to live in a lawless society, yet we sometimes get annoyed when we're told what to do.

Before discussing rules with students, it's important to examine your own feelings and assumptions about rules. If you're feeling ambivalent about the purpose of rules in the classroom, students will certainly pick up on your feelings. So what do you believe about the value of rules? What purpose do you think they serve? A good exercise is to take ten minutes to write down why you think rules are important in the classroom. Then, compare your list to the one below.

Rules in the classroom:

- Create a sense of order and predictability
- Create a climate of respect and healthy interactions
- Create a climate in which children feel safe enough to take risks
- Serve as guidelines for behavior to help children learn self-control
- Help children develop social awareness and responsibility
- Balance the needs of the group with the needs of individuals

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Part of a hopes and dreams display in a first grade classroom



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*A third grader's hope and dream illustration.
"I hope to be a better reader and get to level Q in reading."*

Begin the rule-creation process with "hopes and dreams"

During the first week of school, teachers using the rule-creation approach described in this book invite students to answer the important question, "What do you hope to learn and do this year in school?" While the question may seem simple, posing it to students and asking them to share their responses can have a profound effect on the classroom. Just think about the messages inherent in the question: What you care about matters at school; your hopes and goals are taken seriously here; you have a say in what you'll learn.

Taking the time to help students articulate their goals for school—or their "hopes and dreams" as they're often called—sets a tone of collaboration and mutual respect. It also fosters reflection and self-knowledge by prompting children to ask themselves questions such as "What's important to me at school? What do I want to get better at? What do I care about?"

Sharing individual goals for the school year creates a meaningful context for creating classroom rules. Once students have articulated their hopes and dreams, the teacher asks, “If these are our hopes and dreams, what rules will we need so we can make all of these hopes and dreams come true?” In this way, rules become logical outgrowths of the students’ and teachers’ goals, something that will help them achieve their hopes, rather than directives handed down from above.

In order for this process to work, however, teachers must guide students toward thinking about goals that are realistic, learning-oriented, and achievable in school. It’s not realistic for a child to “become a famous ballerina” or “become a basketball star” this year, for example. And “having recess all day” or “having lunch all day” is not related to the work of school. Here are essential ways to ensure that children name hopes and dreams that will be truly useful and meaningful:

Set the context by talking about the kinds of work that go on in classrooms

Before asking students what they hope to accomplish, primary grade teachers might give the children a tour of the classroom and talk about some of the things they’ll be doing in school this coming year. Teachers of older children might ask students to think back on the previous year and name an accomplishment they felt proud of and something that was difficult for them.

Express your own hopes and dreams for the school year

Many teachers express their own hopes for the students in the coming year before asking students to express theirs. This sets the tone and establishes clear expectations about the kind of hopes and dreams that students will be naming. Although the teacher’s language will vary depending on the age of the students, the point is to express a desire for a classroom that is safe, caring, and filled with learning. For example, a second grade teacher might say, “This year I hope our classroom will be a safe and caring place to learn and that everyone will do their best work.” A fifth grade teacher might say, “This year I hope that students can be friendly with everyone and learn how to work hard.”

Use qualifiers when asking students to name their hopes and dreams

Instead of asking “What do you hope to do this year?” teachers should ask, “What do you hope to learn in our classroom this year?” or “What do you hope you’ll be able to work on in our classroom this year?” or “What are some social or academic skills you hope to work on this year in school?”

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Limiting the question to the arenas of work, learning, skills, classroom, and school helps make sure students name hopes and dreams that will be attainable.

Below are some examples of how students at various grade levels expressed their hopes and dreams when teachers used the process described above:

“I hope I get to build with the blocks and play a lot.”

Kindergarten student

“I hope I get to do lots of hard work.”

First grade student

“I hope to learn how to count money.”

Second grade student

“I hope to get better at math.”

Third grade student

“I hope I learn to spell better.”

Fourth grade student

“I hope I’ll make some new friends.”

Fifth grade student

“I hope I do a lot of interesting projects.”

Sixth grade student

“I hope to improve my grades and enjoy my classes.”

Seventh grade student

“I hope to be able to read better and faster and to get over my shyness.”

Eighth grade student

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Have students share their hopes and dreams

It’s important that children share their hopes and dreams with the class because the sharing helps students develop an awareness and appreciation for each other’s goals.

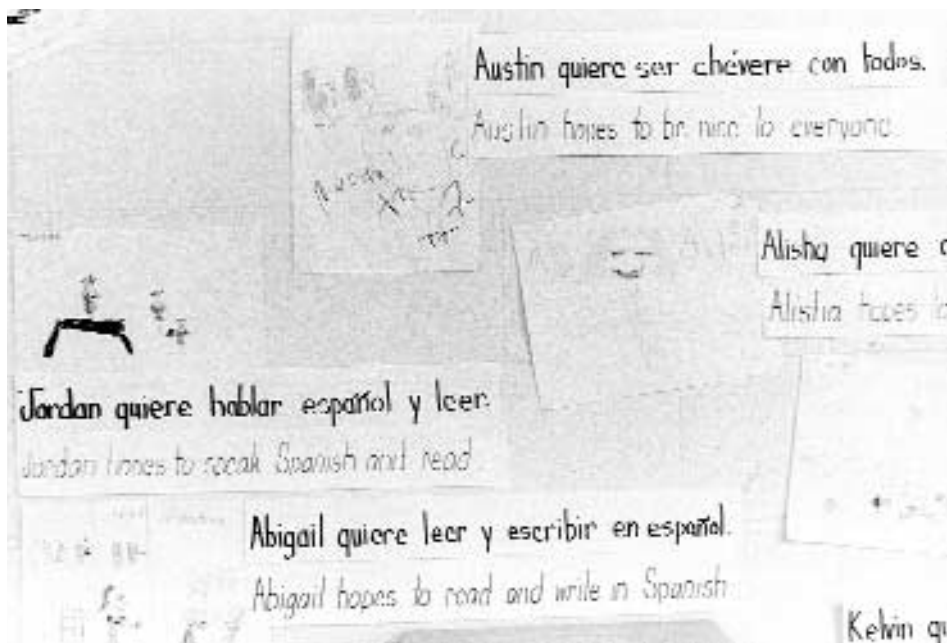
How students share their hopes and dreams varies depending on the age of the children and the teacher’s style. Students might draw pictures of themselves doing their hope and dream, write in a journal about their hope, or share their hope verbally in a small or large group. Below are some ways that teachers at different grade levels have structured the sharing of hopes and dreams:

Kindergarten to second grade

- Children begin by sharing their many hopes and dreams verbally. The teacher then asks each child to think about his/her *most important* hope for the year and to share this with the group. The teacher records these on a chart.
- Children draw a picture of their most important hope for the year, and the teacher (or the children themselves if they are able) records their words on the picture. These can be displayed immediately as a “Hopes and Dreams” bulletin board or later as part of the display on classroom rules.
- Students draw a picture of themselves achieving their dream and then share this picture with a partner. Children then report what their partner’s hope is to the group.

Third to fifth grade

- After an initial conversation about hopes and dreams, students write in journals to express their many goals for the school year. The next day they reread these journal entries and decide on one most important hope for the school year to share with the class.

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- Students make an illustration or collage that expresses their most important hope for the school year. These are shared with the group and then mounted and displayed in the classroom or hallway.

Sixth to eighth grade

- Students write in journals at school or as a homework assignment, reflecting on the previous year of school and articulating their hopes, dreams, and worries for this year. One possible structure for reflecting on the previous year is for students to write about one thing they felt successful at last year, one thing they didn't feel successful at, one thing they loved to do, and one thing they dreaded doing.
- As a whole class, students brainstorm possible hopes and dreams in different categories: a social hope, an academic hope, an athletic hope, etc. With this to get them thinking, students then write about their own hopes in these categories and choose three or four hopes, each from a different category, to share with the group. The method allows students to express more than one hope for the year, something children this age often like to do.

After hopes and dreams have been named and shared, they are displayed prominently in the room. The teacher can then refer to everyone's hopes and dreams easily as s/he begins the conversation about classroom rules. The display then reinforces the idea that classroom rules grow out of everyone's goals for the year.

Students work on illustrating their hopes and dreams for the school year.



Our Hopes + Dreams for 3rd Grade

Angela hopes to be a better reader.
 Nija hopes to learnursive writing.
 Kiara hopes to get better at math.
 Jester hopes to learn the multiplication tables.
 Micah hopes to be a better reader.
 Justin hopes to get good grades.
 Ariela hopes to learn about the continents.
 Caroline hopes to learn a better speller.
 Aiko hopes to learn more about history.
 Yasser hopes to meet more teachers and friends.
 Niyah hopes to get better at reading.
 Miriana hopes to learn more about science.
 Erick hopes to learn how to do division.
 Daniel hopes to become a better artist.
 Ashley hopes to be a better math student.
 Julia hopes to learn how to write in cursive.
 Omario hopes to learn a lot of new things.
 Harrison hopes to make new friends.
 Quinn hopes to get better at writing.
 Juan hopes to do hard math.
 Rene hopes to learn more about computers.
 Daphne hopes to read long chapter books.
 Mrs. W. hopes that all the students will
 learn to love books and reading.

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Students' hopes and dreams are often displayed as simple lists.

OUR HOPES & DREAMS

Kevin R. - My goal is to pass.	Bianca - meet new people and get good grades.
Enlie - to pass the 8 th grade and to make new friends.	Shawntay - pass and work hard, pass MCAS, just enjoy being in eight grade.
Adam - to pass with at least straight B's	Mi - pass 8 th grade, have good grades, pass MCAS, find new friends.
Alysa - to pass with good grades.	Wahied - to do the best that I can do.
Julie - to do all my homework and do good on tests.	Marissa - pass the 8 th grade with good grades.
Stephanie - pass all of my classes and the MCAS tests.	Kayle - get good grades.
Katie - to stay focused and avoid distractions, not let me from performing to my fullest potential.	Sherry - pass 8 th grade, have good grades, meet new people, get high honors, pass the MCAS test.
Donting - to remain on the "New Society" and to make the cheerleading team.	Alex - pass the 8 th grade.
Heather - to do all my homework.	Kevin L. - pass the 8 th grade.
Aaron - to pass.	Meng - get the same grades as last year.
Morgan - to pass the 8 th grade.	Celeste - pass the 8 th grade by getting good grades and staying out of trouble and do my best to be a good student.
Karina - to work hard and pass the 8 th grade and to reach my destiny.	Chouet - to pass and play for the school soccer team.
Mrs. Cucubieri - to help my students achieve their full potential and to have fun.	Andrew - go to the high school and get good grades.
Tress - to pass the 8 th grade.	Ray - to get good grades.
Francis - to get in trouble and pass the 8 th grade with at least a B average.	C.J. - to be at least a B average.

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Hopes and dreams in a music class

*By Jennifer Fichtel*Responsive Classroom *consulting teacher**Fitchburg Public Schools, Massachusetts*

Hundreds of drawings of children playing instruments, singing, dancing, and toe tapping adorn the walls, bulletin boards, and closet doors of Donna Dik's music classroom. Beautiful to look at—rich in color, detail, and whimsy—these illustrations represent the hopes and dreams of Donna's students at Reingold Elementary School. In the center of each cluster of drawings is a list of the children's hopes for music class: James hopes to sing a song about fishing; Erik hopes to play the electric guitar; Nou Tsa hopes to sing and dance; Natasha hopes to be in a musical performance.

When Donna began the school year—her first as a music teacher at Reingold Elementary—she was faced with the daunting task of getting to know more than 600 students in grades one through four. She turned to the idea of hopes and dreams. "I couldn't think of a better way to begin to get to know my students and to let them know that I cared about their interests and ideas," says Donna.

During her first meeting with each class, Donna expressed her hopes for music class and asked students to express theirs. She recorded their answers and provided materials for students to draw themselves achieving their hopes. Before long, the classroom was transformed into an art gallery as children from each class added their creations to the display. But that wasn't all that was transformed, according to Donna. "The process, which only took one class period per group, created a sense of shared purpose and set a positive tone that lasted an entire year."

Donna keeps the drawings up all year long, along with the Reingold school-wide constitution. Created with a group of students in the fall, the constitution lists a set of rules that everyone in the school agrees to follow. In addition to using the constitution as a guideline for behavior in music class, Donna frequently draws students' attention to the connection between the school-wide constitution and their hopes and

dreams. In this way, she helps them understand how honoring the rules of the community helps all students achieve their hopes and dreams.

“What started as a way for me to get to know the students,” says Donna, “has become a wonderful way to build a community of learners.”

A display of children’s hopes and dreams for music class



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Invite families into the process

Many teachers invite families into this process of articulating hopes for the year. There's no question that families are more likely to trust and support this approach to discipline if they understand the thinking behind it. Inviting families to express their own hopes for their child is a good first step to building this important sense of trust. Here are a few possible ways to do this:

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- At the first family-teacher conference (preferably before the first day of school), share your hope for the year. Then ask the family to share theirs: "What's your most important hope for your child in school this year?" or "What do you think is most important for your child to learn in school this year?" It's best to send this question to families ahead of time so they can think about it before the conference.
- Early in the school year, send a letter to families explaining the process of hopes and dreams and inviting them to write back with their goals for their child this year. Some teachers ask families specifically to share an academic goal and a social goal. Others leave the question more open-ended.
- In preparation for the first open house, create a "Hopes and Dreams" display showing all of the students' goals for the year. Students can write a personal letter to their families asking them to share their most important hopes for the child's school year.

Generate a list of preliminary rules

"If these are our hopes and dreams, what rules will we need to help us make them come true?" This is a pivotal question and one that teachers ask soon after students have articulated their hopes for the year. Thinking through this question helps students make the important connection between their personal hopes for the year and the classroom rules.

It also helps them to see that *everyone's* hopes and dreams are important and that the rules are there to help *everyone* succeed. Without these understandings, the rules will hold little meaning.

There are various ways to begin the process of generating rules. Some teachers begin with a whole-group discussion: "If Tai wants to get better at writing and Evalina to learn Spanish and Sheng to learn how to do division, what rules will we need to help them reach these goals? What rules will we need to help all of us reach our goals? Let's start by making a list."

Other teachers, especially those of upper grades, prefer to have students begin by reflecting personally and writing about classroom rules. They might begin: “If these are our goals for the year, what do you think will be the one to three most important rules for our class?” For homework or as an in-class writing assignment, students then name the rules and explain why they think those are the most important ones. To help older students feel freer and more honest with this assignment, teachers can assure students that their responses will be kept confidential. Once the writings are complete, the teacher can assemble a list of proposed rules for discussion, perhaps noting how often each rule appeared in students’ writings but without attaching names to the rules.

Help students frame the rules in the positive

Regardless of how a teacher goes about this initial task of generating rules with students, it’s likely that many of the rules will be expressed in the negative, a clue, perhaps, to how children generally perceive rules in our society. For example, here’s a first attempt at a list of rules from a third grade class:

Do not scare or yell at anyone.

Don’t be rude.

Don’t lie to the teacher.

Don’t fight in line.

No fighting at recess.

Listen to the teacher.

Don’t push anyone.

Be nice to other people.

Don’t say swear words.

Don’t run in the halls.

The task now is to help students reframe the rules in the positive. One way to do this is to stop every time a negative rule is expressed and ask students to try to reframe it in the positive. For example, when a child suggests, “Do not scare or yell at anyone,” the teacher can say, “We don’t want to scare or yell at anyone here. So if we’re not going to scare or yell at anyone, how do you think we should treat or talk to each other?” Some responses from students might include:

“Talk to others in a respectful way.”

“Use a friendly voice.”

“Stay in control even if you’re mad.”

Another possibility is to complete the entire list and then change the negative rules into positive ones. The teacher might say, “There are lots of rules here that tell us what *not* to do. I think it’s more helpful to have rules that tell us what *to* do. Let’s see if we can say those rules in a different way so they will help us know what *to* do.”

Thus in the third grade class mentioned above, “Do not scare or yell at anyone” became “Talk to others in a respectful way.” “Don’t be rude” became “Think about other people’s feelings.” “Don’t lie to the teacher” became “Tell the truth” (here the teacher also helped children realize it’s important to be honest not just to the teacher, but to everyone). “Don’t fight in line” became “Keep your hands to yourself and be quiet when you’re in line,” and so forth.

It takes some work to get children to turn their *don’t*s into *dos*. Most children are not accustomed to thinking of rules in positive terms. But it’s important work because rather than constantly telling children what they shouldn’t do, we want to give children guidelines for positive behavior. By framing the rules in the positive, we shift the emphasis from rules that foster compliance to rules that foster self-control and a sense of responsibility to a group. They are constant reminders of what everyone in the classroom, including the teachers, are striving to become. They represent our community ideals.

Creating Rules with Students

From the long list of positive rules, create a few global ones

Remember the third grader in the introduction who expressed her relief that in her school “there isn’t too many rules” but “just a few good ones”? Both teachers and students will feel this same relief when they can consolidate their long list of rules into “a few good ones.” Long lists of rules, even when expressed in the positive, are simply too overwhelming to be truly useful.

A long list of specific rules also becomes a prescriptive recipe, encouraging simple compliance. A short list of broad rules, on the other hand, fosters ethical thinking and the practice of self-control by giving children the opportunity to apply general behavior expectations to various situations themselves.

While students might have generated a list of twenty to thirty possible rules in the first round of discussions, the teacher can now help them see that most of these rules will fall into three to five general categories. The categories that teachers typically use are:

- Taking care of ourselves
- Taking care of others

- Taking care of our classroom and materials
- Taking care to do our best work

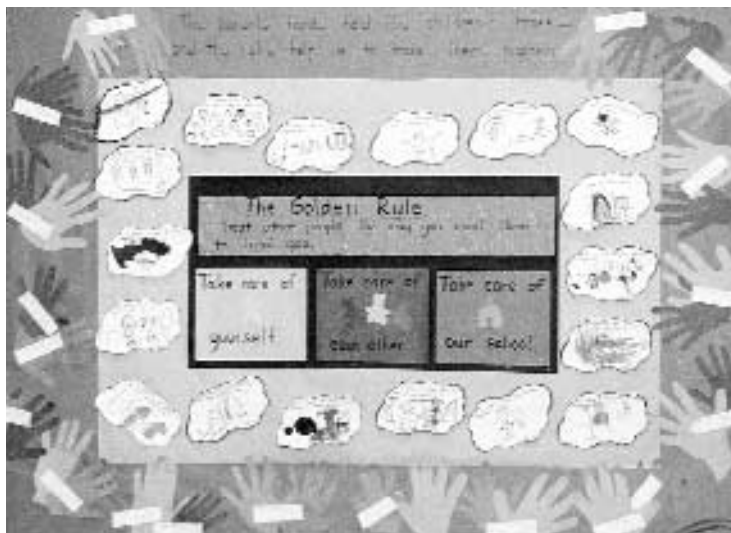
The teacher might begin the consolidation process by saying, “This is a great list of rules, but there are so many of them. I know that I won’t be able to remember all these rules. I wonder if we can put some of them together so that we only have a few rules to remember.” Or, for older students, “This is a good list to start with, but I’m noticing that lots of these rules overlap each other. How could we group them so that we have just a few rules for our class?”

For younger students, the teacher might suggest exactly what the three to five sorting categories will be: “Let’s see if each of these rules will fit under one of these categories: taking care of yourself, taking care of others, taking care of our classroom, and doing our best work.”

In upper grades, the teacher might invite students, perhaps working in pairs, to determine what the three to five sorting categories will be. In all likelihood, the categories they come up with will be very similar to the ones stated above: care for ourselves, care for others, care for materials, and care for our work. But the process of sorting and synthesizing takes the students to a depth of understanding—of the meaning of the rules and of each other—that may not otherwise be possible.

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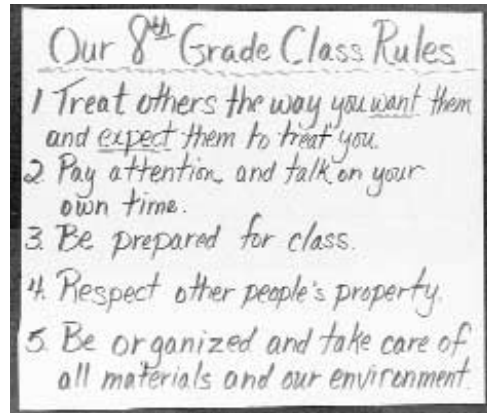
*Rules from a first grade classroom.
The families’ hopes and dreams surround the children’s.*



Creating Rules with Students



Classroom rules can be displayed in a variety of styles, depending on the children's age and preference.



When all the rules have been sorted into three to five categories, the class might want to adjust the wording of the categories. It is always illuminating to hear which words students choose to use—their words are a clue to what they really understand the rules to mean. And because their words are a way for students to communicate nuances of understanding to each other, it's appropriate to let students spend some time on wordsmithing. That said, keep in mind that the exact wording of the final rules is less important than the process of getting to them. Try not to let the class, especially if it's a group of passionate debaters, get too hung up on the details of the wording.

Here are a few examples of the final list of rules—global, positive, and few in number—from several classrooms:

From a second grade classroom

- Take care of yourself and keep everybody safe.
- Help and respect other people.
- Be gentle and take care of all the things in our school.
- Try your hardest and do your best work.

From a fourth grade classroom

- Be in control of yourself.
- Be helpful and respectful of others.
- Treat people the way you want to be treated.
- Be gentle and take care of all the things in our school.
- Be a thinking worker.

From an eighth grade classroom

- Cooperate with each other.
- Listen to each other.
- Take care of our classroom and school environment.
- Show respect for others and their materials.

Talk about what the Golden Rule really means

Often children come up with some version of the Golden Rule—“Treat others as you'd like to be treated”—as one of their classroom rules. While this is an

accepted tenet that is present in many traditions, it can be confusing for children. Young children, and even many older children, may take this saying literally. A literal understanding works in many situations: “If I want the people at this table to share the markers with me, I have to share the markers with them.” But in many situations, it doesn’t work: “If I don’t mind when people kid me about my clothes, then it’s okay for me to kid others about their clothes.”

For this reason, many teachers whose students come up with this rule make it a point to talk with them about what the Golden Rule really means. They help students understand that the rule is about the broad idea of treating others with respect and care, just as you’d like to be treated with respect and care. Part of living by the rule, they lead students to see, is learning what respect and care look like, sound like, and feel like to the other person rather than using ourselves as the standard. With this understanding, children will be more able to make sense of the Golden Rule and use it in their everyday school life.

Creating Rules with Students

Celebrate and share the rules

After working so hard to create this final list of rules which will become the cornerstone of classroom life, it’s fitting for the class to celebrate these rules and share them with students’ families. Here are a few ideas that teachers have used:

Send a letter home to families

In the letter, celebrate the classroom rules and ask for family support. (See the sample letter.)

Have students make a beautiful display of the rules

Perhaps they can write the final rules on a large poster board and surround it with illustrations. In some classes, all students sign the poster to show that they agree to try to live by the rules. Display the poster in a prominent place in the room.

Invite families to the classroom for a rule-signing celebration

Have a poster of the rules ready for students to sign ceremoniously in the presence of their families. Students can prepare a brief presentation for families on how these rules came to be.

So, are classrooms that use this process of rule creation more lax than those using an autocratic approach? This is a common question. The answer is absolutely not. Just because the rules are stated in the positive and students are

Dear Families,

We have been talking a lot during these early weeks of school about our hopes and dreams for this school year. The students and I have articulated many goals for ourselves. Here's a list of our most important ones:

[List the students' and teacher's most important hopes for the year.]

To create a climate where all students can achieve their goals, we have created the following rules for our classroom:

[List the rules that the students and teacher have created.]

You can help us at home. Please keep these lists in a prominent place and review the rules often with your child. We are all working together to create a safe and caring community of learners. I appreciate your support. Please feel free to call me if you have questions about these rules or my approach to classroom discipline.

Sincerely,

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involved in creating them doesn't mean that behavior expectations are in any way "fuzzy" or lower than in other classrooms.

On the contrary, behavior expectations are high as teachers strive to be firm, clear, and consistent. Both teachers and students are highly invested in the rules, and both serve as caretakers of them. Children value the rules more when the rules are their own.

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