

Morning Meeting

A N O V E R V I E W

It's time, it's time, it's time for Morning Meeting now..." The melody, begun by the teacher and picked up by the students, drifts down the hall from the kindergarten classroom. Directly upstairs, in a fourth grade room, a student selects the wooden chime from its resting place on a shelf top and strikes it gently with a mallet. When her classmates quiet down and look at her, she announces simply, "Morning Meeting time." Next door, the teacher of the fifth and sixth graders puts his coffee mug on a counter and rings the old-fashioned school bell which is the signal in his room to stop and listen. "Five minute warning. Finish your plans for the day and come to the rug for Morning Meeting."

Teachers and students crave a certain amount of predictability and routine in the school day, especially at the start. The format of Morning Meeting is predictable, but there is plenty of room for variation and change. Meetings reflect the style and flavor of individual teachers and groups. They also reflect the ebb and flow of a school year's seasons—September's new shoes and anxious, careful faces; December's pre-holiday excitement; February's endless runny noses; April's spring-has-sprung exuberance. Its mixture of routine and surprise, of comfort and challenge, make Morning Meeting a treasured and flexible teaching tool.

PURPOSES AND REFLECTIONS

Purposes and Reflections

The socialization of children has historically been considered an important part of preschools and kindergartens. Learning to play together, to listen to each other, to wait in line are skills that have long been a legitimate part of the early childhood curriculum. But Lilian Katz, noted early childhood educator, sees significant benefits for structured interactions beyond the earliest grades: “There is quite a bit to learn from early childhood education experiences that can be ‘pushed up’ to later grades, instead of the classic pushing down.” (Katz 1998, 8)

Preschool and early childhood programs traditionally begin with a ritual, often called Circle Time. During Circle Time, children gather for a song, practice counting, take attendance, and share. Morning Meeting evolved from this accepted practice, building on children’s needs for social guidance, structure, and interaction. Morning Meeting is a translation of Circle Time for older students, “pushing up” the goals of socialization and using our detailed knowledge of students’ social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Educators have learned that social skills are not a checklist to be mastered by the end of kindergarten so that students can get on with the acquisition of academic skills. Instead, social skills are skills we continue to acquire and refine throughout our lives, just like academic skills.

At every age, children need opportunities to practice and define these skills as part of a group. At five, it may be hard to share the box of crayons; at eleven, it is hard to share a friend. At seven, it is a matter of pride to clean the lunchroom table neatly; at thirteen, it is a matter of pride to disdain the same chore. As Dr. Arnold Gesell concluded from his extensive research on child development, growth is not a straight line function. (Ilg et al. 1981) It loops and spirals and zigs and zags, its pattern influenced by characteristics of each person’s age, background, and individual temperament.

Teachers have long known and researchers are now confirming that social skills are not just something to be taught so that children behave well enough to get on with the real business of schooling. Rather, they are inextricably intertwined with cognitive growth and intellectual progress. A person who can listen well, who can frame a good question and has the assertiveness to pose it, who can examine a situation from a number of perspectives will be a strong learner. All those skills—skills essential to academic achievement—must be modeled, experienced, practiced, extended, and refined in the context of social interac-

tion. Morning Meeting is a forum in which all that happens. It is not an add-on, something extra to make time for, but rather an integral part of the day's planning and curriculum.

Morning Meeting makes important contributions to the tone and content of a classroom. The following broad statements summarize these contributions and each is explored in a section that follows.

Purposes of Morning Meeting

1. **Morning Meeting sets the tone for respectful learning and establishes a climate of trust.**
2. **The tone and climate of Morning Meeting extend beyond the Meeting.**
3. **Morning Meeting motivates children by addressing two human needs: the need to feel a sense of significance and belonging and the need to have fun.**
4. **The repetition of many ordinary moments of respectful interaction in Morning Meeting enables some extraordinary moments.**
5. **Morning Meeting merges social, emotional, and intellectual learning.**

Overview

Morning Meeting sets the tone for respectful learning and establishes a climate of trust.

Beginnings can be critical. The leader of a workshop I recently attended asked our group of teachers and principals to recall and describe our first half hour as teachers. A good number of participants were nearing retirement age and their first moments as teachers were more than thirty years ago, but every one of us could recall in vivid detail what happened and how we felt in those first thirty minutes.

Certainly, the first thirty minutes of each day are not as momentous or embedded in memory as the first thirty minutes in a new career. There are some days, in fact, when we can hardly remember at four o'clock in the afternoon what happened at nine o'clock that morning. The details may have flown from our cluttered memory, but it is likely that the pace and flavor of our first half



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*Morning Meeting helps to create a climate of trust
that encourages children to take risks.*

hour in school had a lot to do with the way we felt at four o'clock and whether the day's challenges felt exhilarating or overwhelming. The same is true for our students. Beginnings matter.

The way we begin each day in our classroom sets the tone for learning and speaks volumes about what and whom we value, about our expectations for the way we will treat each other, and about the way we believe learning occurs.

Children's learning begins the second they walk in the doors of the building. Children notice whether they are greeted warmly or overlooked, whether the classroom feels chaotic and unpredictable, or ordered and comforting. If they announce, "My cat got hit by a car last night but it's gonna' be all right," they may find an interested, supportive audience or one that turns away. Every detail of their experience informs students about their classroom and their place in it.

When we start the day with everyone together, face-to-face, welcoming each person, sharing news, listening to individual voices, and communicating as a caring group, we make several powerful statements. We say that every person matters. We say that the way we interact individually and as a group matters. We say that our culture is one of friendliness and thoughtfulness. We say that hard work can be accomplished and important discoveries can be made by playing together. We say that teachers hold authority, even though they are a part of the

circle. We say that this is a place where courtesy and warmth and safety reign—a place of respect for all.

In order to learn, we must take risks—offering up a tentative answer we are far from sure is right or trying out a new part in the choir when we are not sure we can hit the notes. We can take these risks only when we know we will be respected and valued, no matter the outcome. We must trust in order to risk, and Morning Meeting helps create a climate of trust.

The tone and climate of Morning Meeting extend beyond the Meeting.

We see this in any number of ways. For instance, children may begin to greet each other spontaneously, even before the Meeting circle has convened. A first grade teacher whose class had been using Morning Meeting for several months wrote: “One Tuesday as I stood by the door, waiting for the class to gather, I just watched. They were genuinely glad to see each other. Some were hugging a greeting. Some were clapping for something. What a joy to watch—I was merely an observer and just loved it.”

Sometimes what transfers isn’t a specific behavior, such as a greeting, but is instead an attitude. Ruth Charney, author and teacher at the Greenfield Center School, described this scene from the seventh/eighth grade room she co-taught.

“Time for Meeting,” announced the teacher and the students assembled on the low benches arranged around the perimeter of their whole group meeting area. Three students hung back, whispering by the coat rack.

Their teacher addressed them pleasantly: “Daria, Abby, Lindsay, Meeting is starting.” The girls exchanged looks and moved toward the circle, pointedly ignoring the space others had made for them, sitting instead on the floor a few feet behind one of the benches. Clearly, they had come into the room with their own agenda.

Their teacher, voice still pleasant but firm, looked straight at them: “You need to move into the circle.” They hesitated a moment but then moved as directed.

Quietly, using the structure of the circle, their teacher reminded them of an expectation: You will be fully part of this classroom, not outside of it. Within a few minutes, the three back-benchers were absorbed by a classmate’s announcement that a moose had wandered through his backyard that morning.

When Meeting was over, off they went to math groups, chatting with others along the way, their agenda defused, able to be positive participants in classroom life that day.

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Morning Meeting motivates children by addressing two human needs: the need to feel a sense of significance and belonging, and the need to have fun.

All of us need to feel that we belong and are valued for the competencies, skills, and knowledge we bring to a group, that our unique contributions are recognized and appreciated. All the components of Morning Meeting speak to those needs directly.

Consulting teacher Melissa Correa-Connolly of Leominster, Massachusetts, speaks of what she has seen happen, both in her own elementary classroom and in the rooms of many teachers with whom she has worked:

“I think of Morning Meeting as having such immense power because it meets the emotional needs of children. It acknowledges everyone and makes them feel significant. It does away with the feeling many children have of being a piece of furniture in the classroom. Morning Meeting is the first thing in the morning and it allows children to be seen, to have a voice.”

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Having fun is also a universal human need. Fun is not necessarily synonymous with frivolity or silliness, though it can sometimes be both. It does mean engagement and fascination with what we do. Fun is playful and light-hearted even when the activity is hard and the challenge great. It is not about winning, but about immersion in the pleasure of the activity itself.

Fun might involve striving to find the five punctuation errors planted in the morning message or learning to sing “Dona Nobis Pacem” in three-part

Morning Meeting is full of opportunities to have fun together.



harmony. It might mean trying to guess the three-digit number a classmate is thinking of in a game called “Pico, Fermé, Nada” (*Appendix F*). Fun might mean laughing when serious and dignified Amy reports on her new puppy’s antics, or it might mean learning a new and lively greeting EJ brought back from summer camp.

Fun is also connected with risk-taking. Risks taken in a playful way can teach us how to handle the more serious risks that growth can demand. The children (and adults) who don’t play often have a difficult time reaching their potential because growth almost always requires venturing into the unknown.

One thing is certain. Humans strive to fulfill their needs in whatever way they can, whether those ways are positive or negative. The child who can’t be known or recognized in the group for friendly contributions will be known for his trouble-making contributions. And when our programs don’t provide constructive ways to meet our students’ needs for fun, the students will devise their own, often not-so-constructive ways.

Morning Meeting is full of opportunities for a class to have fun together and for all its members to feel a sense of significance and belonging, needs affirmed by theory and research: “Adler (1930) proposed that a sense of belonging motivates children to develop their skills and contribute to the welfare of all.... Research indicates that educators who establish firm boundaries, foster warm personal relationships in the classroom, and enable students to have an impact on their environment strengthen students’ attachment to their school, their interest in learning, their ability to refrain from self-destructive behaviors, and their positive behaviors.” (Elias et al. 1997, 44)

The repetition of many ordinary moments of respectful interaction in Morning Meeting enables some extraordinary moments.

Morning Meeting, repeated every day, is full of moments that by themselves seem quite mundane and ordinary. But this repetition can enable some quite extraordinary accomplishments within and beyond the Meeting circle, too. Consider this story told by a third grade teacher from a school where Morning Meetings were an established part of school life in all the classrooms:

One wintry Tuesday morning at about 9:30, just as Morning Meeting in my room was ending, a second grader from the classroom adjacent to mine entered and approached me politely. “Excuse me, Mrs. Truesdell, but our teacher isn’t here yet. We finished Morning Meeting, but we don’t know what to do next.”

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A series of missed communications including a school secretary with the flu and a faulty answering machine had resulted in a class without a teacher or a substitute. These seven-year-olds knew the routines so well that they had gathered themselves and conducted an orderly and merry Morning Meeting. I remembered, in fact, hearing the strains of the song “River” wafting through the thin wall that connected the two rooms and thinking how much better it sounded than last week!

These children’s daily participation in the ongoing routines of Morning Meeting had enabled them to take responsibility for these routines even in the absence of their teacher. Their school celebrated their responsible behavior at an assembly later that week.

The habits of participation established by Morning Meeting routines can also serve a community well in more extreme circumstances. The experience of Joyce Love, a revered elementary school teacher in Washington, DC, testifies to this.

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As a part of Morning Meeting, her class knew how to come quickly together and how to listen respectfully to each other. They had considered hard questions such as “What can you say when someone shares something that’s really upsetting to them?” as well as “What might we say when someone shares something that makes them really happy?” They had, under Joyce’s guidance, carefully constructed habits of participation and practiced them day-in and day-out in the most ordinary situations with the most ordinary material—news of a swimming test passed, a baby brother with chicken pox, a visit from relatives.

One morning, several of Joyce’s students saw a dead body on a street corner on their walk to school. Now, when they were confronted with an event of monumental impact, they had a familiar circle to come to. They had patterns of sharing and response that helped their teacher to help them begin to deal with a haunting scene. “If it hadn’t been for Morning Meeting, I wouldn’t have known what to do. Its structures helped take care of things,” recalled Joyce.

Not all extraordinary moments enabled by Morning Meeting are tragic, of course. At Greenfield Center School, eighth graders take a literature course that calls upon them to consider the universal themes of the literary tradition, what educator and author Parker Palmer calls the “big stories” (Palmer 1998), and relate them to the “little stories” of students’ own lives, the stories that tell their personal and individual tales.

For the final assignment, each student writes a play based on an event important in his or her life. Students cast and direct these plays, with fellow class

members as actors, and present them at Play Night for their families, faculty, and friends. Some plays are light, some somber. One might be elaborately plotted with a dozen characters and several settings; the next might be a minimalist dialogue.

All are presentations by a group of young teens relying on each other to make, in Palmer's language, these "little" stories "big," to make art from what they have witnessed in their lives. It is a profound exercise and everyone does it, not just one gifted group, year after year.

Inspired by attending many years of Play Nights, a Center School parent who taught at a local high school tried the same assignment with her literature class. Despite a year with them in which they studied hard and well together, she reported that it failed. An essential ingredient was missing, she realized. That ingredient was trust.

They knew how to write dialogue and paint sets. But sharing things of import to them and trusting in a respectful response—that was another level entirely. In the end, the plays were superficial and the students' commitment to them half-hearted.

Are the Center School plays the product of one year of literature study? Only in part. True, they emerge with the help of an inspiring teacher, at a transitional moment when students are keenly aware of their impending graduation and are poised to look back as they step ahead. But it is also true that they are the product of a group of students who have practiced the Morning Meeting skills of communication and community every day of their school lives for as much as nine years.

They have used their voices to greet, sing, laugh, console, and celebrate within their Meeting circles for all those mornings of all those years. And on Play Night, those voices join an ensemble and speak, not just to each other across the circle, but to the larger audience which they face from the stage. They are oh-so-ready. And Morning Meeting helped get them there.

Morning Meeting merges social, emotional, and intellectual learning.

Morning Meeting provides an arena where distinctions that define social, emotional, and academic skills fade, and learning becomes an integrated experience. Parker Palmer describes his vision of an educational community as one that depends on a dynamic dialogue about things that matter. He states, "Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.... But it is not our knowledge of conclusions that keeps us in the truth. It

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is our commitment to the conversation itself, our willingness to put forward our observations and interpretations for testing by the community and to return the favor to others. To be in the truth, we must know how to observe and reflect and speak and listen, with passion and with discipline, in the circle gathered around a given subject.” (Palmer 1998, 104)

In Morning Meeting, the circle “gathers around” many subjects, some introduced by the teacher, some by the children. In the dialogue of the circle, we stretch each others’ understandings, using the skills which Palmer names: observing, reflecting, speaking, listening.

A consulting teacher tells of a Morning Meeting she led in a classroom she visited in a distant city. The newspaper headline that morning told of a citywide water contamination crisis. At Morning Meeting, she shared that she had seen that headline and asked these third graders what they knew about the water problem in their city.

Her question triggered an outpouring of knowledge. They knew, in fact, a great deal. She listened and noted the facts on a chart. As the listing of what they knew reached an end, the talk turned to what they didn’t know but wondered about. Those questions, too, were noted on the chart, along with some hypotheses. Another teacher from the school observed the Meeting and was incredulous. “Those kids must have been rehearsed; they couldn’t know that much!”

This conversation, within the structured safety of Morning Meeting, allowed learners to put forward what conclusions they knew, to pose questions and venture possible interpretations. They were able to “observe and reflect and speak and listen” communally about a subject that mattered very much to them.

In the wonderful book *On Their Way*, listening and talking are deemed “the power tools.” (Fraser and Skolnick 1994, 145) Recognizing this, many school systems now endorse cooperative learning activities and approaches in classrooms, and there is much talk about the skills of collaboration needed to move into the next decades. Morning Meeting sharpens the tools of listening and talking which are essential for partner chats, small group discussions, peer critiquing, and other cooperative learning strategies.

See *Appendix A* for a full listing of the myriad social, emotional, and intellectual skills children are learning as they gather together in Morning Meeting.

Purposes of Morning Meeting

GETTING STARTED

Establish a set schedule for Morning Meeting.

Ideally, Morning Meeting happens every day. The best time is first thing in the morning after most children have arrived and settled in. Schedule fifteen to thirty minutes for Morning Meeting, depending upon the age of the children in your class. You may wish to reconsider your schedule as the year progresses. The class that squirmed their way raggedly through ten minutes of meeting time in September may be quite ready for double that time by November.

It is important, even with older students, to keep Morning Meetings from going on too long. It is also important to plan for a change of pace immediately following Morning Meeting. When it is followed by an academic period requiring continued sitting in a circle, it can be deadly for even the most focused and attentive students. Even a few minutes of an activity which requires some moving around provides the needed variation.

Many teachers of young children have found that a separate “Sharing” meeting at a predictable time later in the day is more productive. The attention and focus that students can give each other during Sharing is more important than the time of day that it happens.

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Morning Meeting sharpens children's speaking and listening skills.



Introduce Morning Meeting to your students.

Explain to students that you will begin each day with a meeting—Morning Meeting. Share with them your hopes and goals for this part of the day. Your list might sound something like this:

- I hope that we will all get to know one another—not just our best friends.
- I want us to be able to practice taking care of each other so that we can all feel good about being in this class.
- I want us to be able to share different experiences and ideas.
- I want us to have fun together.

If your students are already familiar with Morning Meeting from previous years, ask them to share their hopes and goals for this part of the day.

Getting Started**Communicate with parents about Morning Meeting.**

Parents are very supportive of Morning Meeting when they understand its format and goals. If their first impression is formed from a child's report of a "new game we played at Morning Meeting," they may draw the mistaken conclusion that this is time taken away from learning. A letter to parents giving them a glimpse of this part of their child's day and describing the learning integral to it, can give them a framework in which to place the accounts they hear from their children. Good communication will help parents see Morning Meeting for the vital learning time that it is.

A sample letter is included in *Appendix B*. Feel free to use it as a template, adapting it to your school and your class. You might also consider talking about Morning Meeting at a Parent Night, or PTA meeting, maybe even structuring a piece of the parents' meeting in Morning Meeting format. Encourage parents to visit the classroom and join in a Morning Meeting.

Phase in the implementation of Morning Meeting.

Acquaint your class with one component of Morning Meeting at a time, introducing and modeling each. (See the *Getting Started* section for each component in the following chapters.) When you sense that students are comfortable and ready for more, then add a component. Though this isn't their eventual order, the most successful order of introduction is: Greeting, Group Activity, News and Announcements, and Sharing.

A plan for the first day might involve teaching children how to get into a circle, and then singing a song. On the second day, a greeting might be taught after the circle has formed. A few days later, the Morning Message chart might be introduced with a message as simple as “Welcome.” Full Morning Meeting might not happen for several weeks.

Factors like the age and school experience of your students will influence your decision about timing. Your knowledge of your class will determine how quickly you add components. A carefully paced and deliberate introduction of new components, with time to practice and reflect, will pay off in the end.

Choose and teach signals you will use consistently.

It is essential to have simple, effective signals to get students’ attention. Raising your voice is often neither simple nor effective, and if students are still involved in conversation or activity, chances are that many will not absorb the announcement.

Instead, teachers have found various non-verbal signals that say to students: “Stop what you are doing and give me (or a student who may be about to make an announcement) your attention.” Some teachers ring a chime, bell, or triangle; others turn the classroom lights off, then on. When you have the attention

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A child uses the “hands up” signal to ask for the group’s attention before beginning his sharing.



of all students, make a brief statement. “Five minutes till Morning Meeting. Put away what you are working on and come to the Meeting area.”

A “hands up” signal is useful to bring quiet and attention once the Meeting circle is formed. These signals are not exclusively for teacher use, but are available for responsible use by students as well. The same respect and response is expected whether a signal originates with a student or teacher, as in the following example.

It is Jonas’s turn to share. He brought his gerbil, Harry, who has been waiting in his cage on a table in the corner. When Jonas leaves the circle to get Harry, many conversations commence. Jonas comes back, ready to share, but his classmates continue to chatter. He raises his hand. Across the circle, Amanda notices and raises hers. She gently elbows Leisha, next to her, who is whispering to Damien. Up goes Leisha’s hand and she stops in mid-sentence and looks at Jonas. Around the circle hands go up and silence spreads. It is simple and efficient, with not a word of scolding or blame issued. His audience is ready and Jonas begins. “This is Harry. He’s really a she...”

Getting
Started

**The logistics of Morning Meeting are important.
Consider and teach them carefully.**

Over and over in our teaching lives, we are reminded not to make assumptions about what children know. Details about forming the circle for Morning Meeting and about coming to the circle with hands empty demand careful instruction at the outset and vigilant monitoring even when routines are established.

Understanding the “why” behind the details helps. Discuss why the circle is important to Morning Meeting. Talk about why it’s important not to be clicking pens and rustling papers during Morning Meeting.

These discussions vary with the ages and readiness of students. I have heard six-year-olds offer simple and profound explanations: “A circle makes it possible for every person to see every other person. It has no front or back.” I have heard twelve-year-olds engage in thoughtful and sophisticated discussions about different classroom arrangements—desks in rows, lecture halls, round seminar tables—and what sort of activity each promotes.

Many classes sit on the floor for Morning Meeting. Other classes seem to handle themselves better, or feel recognized as older, when seated in chairs. There is no single correct way. What’s important is that the circle creates an open and inviting space which allows for a group activity and encourages a comfortable but attentive attitude.

If students need to move furniture to clear a space large enough for the whole class to make a circle, or if they need to move their chairs over to the circle area, talk about how it can be done smoothly.

“We will need to move our chairs in a way that takes care of our room and the people in it. What are some things we will need to think about so that we can do it safely and efficiently?” poses the teacher to her third grade class.

“Not scuffing the floors.”

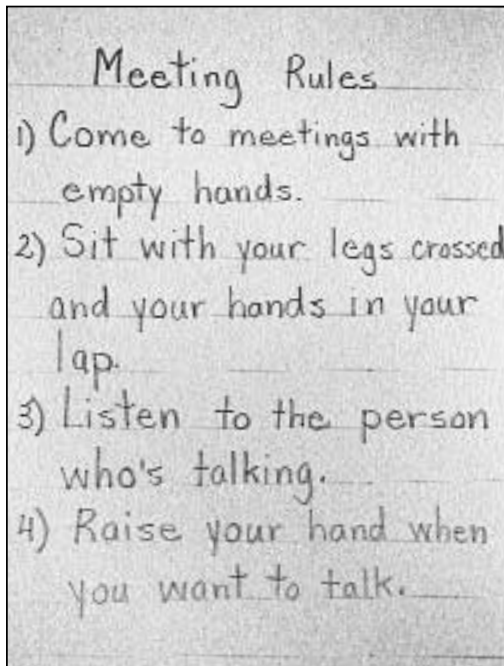
“Be careful not to hit anybody with your chair by accident.”

“Put chairs down softly so we don’t bother the kindergartners on the first floor.”

A bit of modeling helps. “Show me, Shannon, how you can get your chair into the circle in a way that does all those things we just talked about. What do you think, class?” Practice it. Reflect about how it went. “Let’s time ourselves. Was it safe? Was it efficient? On a scale of one to five, rate how we managed it.” (For more about how to use modeling as a teaching strategy, see Appendix C.)

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Meeting rules vary depending on the age and needs of a group. The rules on the left were generated by a group of first graders, and the rules on the right were created by a group of fifth and sixth graders.



Generate Morning Meeting rules with the students.

After students are comfortable with a couple of the components of Morning Meeting, refer to the goals named and pose a question which will establish a basic set of meeting procedures. “How can we take care of ourselves and each other so that our hopes for Morning Meeting can happen? What will we need to do?”

Implicit in the stance of this question is a view of rules as a social necessity generated by the community involved, not an arbitrary and disconnected list of imperatives. Answers will likely include some variation of the following:

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- Listen
- Look at the person who’s talking
- Keep your body in control
- Raise your hand if you want to talk
- Keep your hands down when someone is speaking
- Don’t laugh at anyone

For many of the rules, a definition of terms is in order. Children are much more able to follow rules when they are defined in concrete terms.

“Listen!” volunteers a kindergartner.

“And how will someone who’s speaking know that you’re listening?” asks his teacher. A discussion of some of the finer points of listening etiquette follows: your eyes are on the person; you try not to wiggle; if you have to go to the bathroom, you try to wait until the person is done talking. Indeed, those are hallmarks of quality listening for five- and six-year-olds.

“Be respectful,” offers a ten-year-old earnestly. “For sure,” endorses her teacher. “And how do people show respect in a meeting?”

When a simple list and a common understanding of the rules have been reached, a poster with these rules displayed near the Meeting area can be a helpful reminder.

Give students responsibility in Morning Meeting.

Virtually every moment in Morning Meeting is laden with opportunities for students to assume responsibility in the community we call our classroom. They are responsible for making someone feel welcome, asking a thoughtful question,



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Meetings are rich with opportunities for students to assume responsibility and actively participate.

making a kind comment, solving a “puzzler” question on the chart. In some classrooms, once Morning Meeting is familiar and established, students also take turns leading the whole Meeting or selected parts of it.

We must give our students real responsibility in Morning Meeting; we must believe that they can be trusted and will be successful in meeting the expectations we hold. This can be difficult, particularly for those of us who gained much of our experience in more teacher-centered settings. We may be accustomed to being the dispensers of information and the handers-out of papers. It can be a tricky business to step back from the center, while remaining in control.

Pay attention to your role as teacher.

Make no mistake: Successful Morning Meetings require a teacher who is in control in the classroom. As teachers we are interpreters, synthesizers, balance-keepers, time-keepers, and safety-net holders. Even when students are leading a section of Meeting, we are watchful and often intervene with a reframing question, a quick suggestion, or redirection.

What is required of us in this role may be simple and straightforward. “Choose one more person for a question or comment, Danita,” we say when many hands are raised and time is running short; “Join the circle, Todd,” to a boy who always wants to hang back.

Other times, discerning and guiding the dynamics in Morning Meeting can be more complex. Jeremy continually shares complicated details of “scary science” stories about mutant viruses, colliding asteroids, and toxic pesticides which invisibly saturate strawberries. He is a highly knowledgeable child and his graphic details are accurate and documented.

His teacher wonders about the effect of this stream of threatening news, so authoritatively presented, upon his eleven-year-old peers. Are they terrified, challenged, or humiliated by their relative lack of factual knowledge? Is this a positive way for Jeremy to define a niche in the class? Careful observation and perhaps a one-on-one chat with Jeremy outside of Meeting will inform his teacher as she contemplates whether her intervention is needed to protect either Jeremy or the class.

Bob Strachota, author and teacher at the Greenfield Center School, tells a story of a child he coached in soccer who commented, “I like how you taught us soccer. You were always in the middle, but never in the way.” The teacher’s role in Morning Meeting is a bit like that. We are not the center, but we are central.

Getting
Started

Pay attention to the management aspects of Morning Meeting and hold children to the expectations you have named together.

Addressing what can seem like small details—whom students greet, where they sit, which students are rarely the recipients of thoughtful comments—sends two messages: you value the skills and attitudes that specific actions reflect and you believe in the capacity of your students to accomplish them.

For Morning Meeting to flourish, we must let children know that we are as serious about their behavior and skills during this time as we are during reading group or math group. Let them know by your comments that you notice how they are doing with the named expectations, and that you will hold them to those expectations, helping them by reminders and directions when they need them. Frame your comments in the positive, focusing upon what students are doing right or upon helping them identify what would be a better way, rather than naming what it is they are not doing.

You may think of these sorts of comments as the “three R’s”—reinforcing, reminding, or redirecting comments. Here are some examples:

Reinforcing

- I notice the way everyone remembered to smile at the person they greeted today.
- I notice lots of people sitting next to different classmates each day.
- Most people are remembering to read the message chart when they enter our room in the morning.
- I notice how quickly and quietly we moved our chairs into a circle this morning.

Reminding

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- Before we move to the Meeting rug, remind me what you will think about as you choose where to sit.
- Who remembers what to do if you forget the name of someone you want to greet?
- Laurie, remind me, what do we need to remember as we move our chairs into the circle?

Redirecting

- I hear a lot of chair legs dragging across the floor. Show me, Jonah, how we can hold our chairs when we move them so that they don’t scuff the floor.
- Today you must sit next to someone of the opposite gender, Cheryl.
- I see that a lot of people are looking at things that others brought for Sharing. Show me where we could put these things so that we can give our attention to the person speaking.

Morning Meeting responsibilities

In implementing and assessing Morning Meeting, keep the following general responsibilities in mind.

Teachers' responsibilities

- **To make sure the space is adequate and appropriate for the component. Can a circle form? Can all be seen? Can a particular game be safely played?**
- **To act as timekeeper, keeping things moving**
- **To facilitate the Meeting, making sure that all children are greeted, that a variety of children are responding to sharing, that the tone is respectful, etc.**
- **To observe students' skills—both social and academic**
- **To notice behaviors and to reinforce, remind, and redirect using positive language**
- **To make sure that there is equal opportunity to participate, that gender or personality traits aren't dictating participation patterns**
- **To make sure everyone in the classroom (paraprofessionals, visitors, parents, etc.) is included in the Meeting**

Students' responsibilities

- **To get to Meeting promptly and to form the circle safely and efficiently**
- **To participate fully—contributing actively, listening well, and responding appropriately**
- **To interact with a variety of classmates in the good spirit of Morning Meeting**
- **To move smoothly from Meeting to the next activity**

Getting Started

FINE TUNINGS

Q. *Most of my students really are great at Morning Meeting, but a couple of my students just can't sit still and behave themselves. How can I help them be part of Meeting and not disrupt it?*

A. Children vary a great deal in their ability to follow Meeting rules. The teacher's knowledge of the individual child is the starting point for any action. Is the child younger than most peers and simply not yet ready for the expectations that are appropriate for the rest of the group? Are there special needs that make participation particularly challenging?

For the child who is simply too young, a special arrangement about the length of time he attends Morning Meeting makes sense. Give a signal that will let him know when he is to leave the circle, and discuss what he'll do during the remaining Meeting time. Gradually, as he is successful with sitting still, extend the time he spends in Meeting.

Sometimes a bit of situational assistance is all that is needed. "Miranda, I notice that you have a hard time listening to other people when you sit next to Molly. You need to pick a different place to sit at Morning Meeting."

Or to the fidgeter whose fancy gizmo-watch treats everyone to a rendition of three electronic verses of "The Yellow Rose of Texas" at least twice in every Meeting, "Your watch needs to be in your cubby during Morning Meeting, Gerard."

Some children with lots of overflowing energy are better able to concentrate if they have something that quietly occupies their hands during Meeting. Is this fair, some may ask, when the rule is to come to Meeting empty-handed? This is a complex question about justice that repeats itself with variations all through our lives.

Fair treatment is responsive to individual needs and doesn't always mean treating people with a cookie-cutter sameness. When students trust that their needs, too, will be met in the same spirit of fairness, they are generally able to understand and accept these modifications.

Occasionally, a child's special needs require more elaborate intervention. I saw a skillful example of this a few years ago in a fourth/fifth grade inclusion classroom. Andrew was a fifth grader whose special needs manifested in blurting out inappropriate and rude remarks often unconnected to anything preceding them. Early in the first weeks of the school year, it was clear that he was not

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ready to be part of group sharing, that he needed some very specialized and intensive instruction in order to participate in this part of Meeting.

So, every day, when it was time for Sharing, Andrew and one of his teachers, Ms. Scamardella (Ms. S.), left the circle and moved to a table in the opposite corner of the room where Andrew had “private sharing” with Ms. S. while co-teacher Ms. Daggett continued the Meeting. In his “private sharing,” Andrew practiced sharing a piece of news appropriately, with no swearing or name-calling. Ms. S. modeled careful patterns of suitable responses. Then she shared a piece of news and helped him learn to choose a polite response and practice it.

After a few months, Andrew was able to rejoin the group for Sharing, listening quietly most days, and on a really good day, offering a comment or a question “on the spot.” Andrew’s own sharing to the group was scheduled for Friday each week, sharing which he planned and rehearsed a few minutes each day, Monday through Thursday, with Ms. S.

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This example is more extreme than most, but it illustrates a couple of important principles. Just as different groups are ready for the phasing in of Morning Meeting components at different rates, individual children may be ready at different rates also. While children should participate in Morning Meeting as much as they can with as little modification as possible, if their participation is “stuck” in the negative, if they are spending more time in the time-out chair than in the Meeting circle, then clearly the teacher must pay special attention and address the situation.

Q. *I have several children who frequently come in late, and a couple who have to leave in the middle of Meeting for special programs. Should they be part of Meeting?*

A. Yes, definitely. Morning Meeting is for everyone. Latecomers should be greeted pleasantly and welcomed without unduly disrupting whatever is happening in Meeting. In order to minimize the disruption while still making the latecomer feel welcome, some teachers assign a child the daily job of welcoming latecomers into the circle.

Meeting time itself is not the time to address the tardiness, frustrating as it may be. If it is an occasional lateness, simply help the child fit into the flow of the day. If it is a chronic problem with a particular child, then some investigation is in order. Do they walk to school? Dawdle once they’re in the building? Do parents drop them off on the way to work?

Sometimes a chat with the student alone is enough; other times parents’ help is needed. And sometimes, no matter how many phone calls and discussions of

the importance of beginning the day with the class and how promptness implicitly communicates respect and responsibility, there is little progress.

In the case of students who have to leave early for “specials,” make sure that Greeting can happen with them in the circle and teach them how to leave the circle quietly and unobtrusively when it is time. If the same students must leave every day, you might think about scheduling a separate “Sharing” meeting near the end of the day when everyone can attend. And for younger children who are not yet able to read the chart independently, make sure they are aware of news and announcements for the day.

Q. *Children are really comfortable with our Morning Meeting, maybe too comfortable. Even I sometimes feel like it's boring. Help!*

A. This is one of the areas where the teacher acts as a “balancer.” There is a sensitive balance between the lovely sense of security that routine can provide and the monotony that can creep in when that routine is unlivened and unleavened. As classes grow comfortable with each other and with the basic format of Morning Meeting, we must introduce variation.

Ruth Charney speaks about the perils of overscriptedness: “Sometimes I build Morning Meeting primarily around a game, after a quick greeting. Or I might stress discussion about current events my students are clearly interested in. Our students are all differently abled and they shine in different parts of Meeting. I find that once a group is comfortable with the order and structure of Morning Meeting, then varying the pace, tempo, and proportion of structures is essential lest comfort turn to complacency, or worse yet, contempt.”

Q. *Children in my classroom usually choose to sit next to their friends. Any ideas for making this work better?*

A. Calling this to students’ attention, within the context of the larger purposes of Morning Meeting, is often enough intervention. “I notice,” says the teacher, “that for the last several mornings, many of us have been choosing to sit next to our good friends. Remember that one of the purposes of Morning Meeting is to help us get to know and feel comfortable with everyone—including those who are not already our friends. Think about that when you choose where you will sit this morning at Meeting.” Tying what may seem a superficial detail to the grander vision we hold, to the underlying significance, helps students see why it merits attention.

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Sometimes formalizing these expectations into seating cues is necessary. “Boys next to girls” and “new friends’ day” can be useful shorthand for reminding students of our expectations and shaping the options a bit, when needed.

There are also ways to arrange seating which engineer different mixes and shake up entrenched patterns. In some primary classes, students make and decorate “sit-upons” with their names, which teachers rotate often so that children sit next to many class members. In older classes, you might want to start with a round of “A Warm Wind Blows” (*Appendix F*), a very quick game which will shake up the seating arrangement.

At certain developmental stages, issues of gender and friendship are at the fore. Recently, I visited in a fifth/sixth grade classroom where the students assembled themselves into a Meeting circle that was a clear sociogram. Girls sat next to girls and boys next to boys. A couple of clear “best friend” clusters could be identified by the shoulder-to-shoulder huddled posture they assumed. The circle was ragged, with two children sitting considerably back from the rest.

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The teacher took his place in the circle and looked around quietly. “Meeting seating, please,” he announced, and as if they were accomplished square dancers responding to a call, the students arose and wound their way around and across the circle, pausing to survey the scene before sitting again, cross-legged, on the floor. The circle was now a circle, students sitting boy-girl-boy-girl evenly distributed around its perimeter. “Good Morning!” smiled their teacher and the Meeting began.

Scripted? Certainly. But sometimes it’s our job to provide a script when the one the students have created is destructive to the group. After an initial and mandatory groan, these students didn’t object. They were testing a limit and were relieved to find that, yes, it was still there. There are some ages at which this structure would not be necessary and some ages at which it would not be tolerated and would cause a reaction more problematic than helpful. For that particular group, at that point in their development, it was just right.

Q. *In my classroom, there is a child nobody wants to sit next to. How should I address this?*

A. Frequently students deliberately ostracize a certain child, the social outcast of the group, by not sitting next to her. Action is required on two fronts—one immediate, the other longer term.

First, do whatever you must to stop the exclusion-by-seating. Remove the element of choice by assigning seating patterns that rotate (see previous question).

Or assign partners who will sit together at Morning Meeting and work together during any partner activities within the Meeting.

Identifying why the particular child is not accepted and working with her and others in the group to change the situation is clearly a long-term project. Sometimes, assigning or reading a book chosen for its relevant plot can help prompt a “safe” discussion of a social issue such as exclusion.

Helping a child overcome this kind of reputation, especially when there is a long and entrenched history, is tough. Making sure that all classroom members include her respectfully in the seating and other routines of Morning Meeting is an important start.

Q. *What is the difference between Class Meeting and Morning Meeting?*

A. Class Meetings are held for the purpose of solving a problem, or perhaps planning for a project or event or debriefing afterwards. They are generally not held every day.

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Morning Meetings are held for the purposes named earlier and are held every day. They are not used as a time to solve problems or take care of general classroom business. Teachers who use both kinds of meetings often comment that many of the habits of participation and social skills that are developed through Morning Meeting help their students in democratic, cooperative processes like Class Meetings.

Q. *Is it important that I do the components in the order you suggest?*

A. Yes. The order of the four components—Greeting, Sharing, Group Activity, and News and Announcements—matters (although they are introduced in a different order, as covered earlier). Greeting serves as a logical warm-up and tone-setter for Sharing, which requires that students feel a sense of comfort and trust in the group. The group must be feeling settled and calm in order for Sharing to work well. We’ve often seen teachers do Sharing after the Group Activity or News and Announcements and then wonder why the students weren’t able to listen well or ask focused and thoughtful questions.

The Group Activity follows Sharing because at this point in the Meeting the children are ready for the liveliness which whole-group involvement brings. News and Announcements helps to bring the group back to a more calm stance after the liveliness of Activity and serves as a transition to the rest of the school day.