

Grades K–2

I was at the bakery counter in the supermarket one day, when a little girl came skipping up waving a dollar bill.

“My Grandma gave me a dollar to buy donut holes,” she proclaimed to the clerk. “How many holes can I get for a dollar?”

The woman behind the counter told her that she could get six.

“Six! That’s a lot,” the girl replied. Then, without missing a beat, she said, “If I had two dollars I could get twelve of them!”

“Yep,” the store clerk replied. “Donut holes are six for sixty-nine cents.”

“Oh, but I only have a dollar,” the girl said, looking slightly confused.

The clerk explained that sixty-nine cents was less than a dollar and that she would get six holes and some change back.

In her excitement, the girl danced to her grandmother to tell her the good news. Then she danced back to place her order, keeping careful count as she picked out the kind of donut holes she wanted. Then once again to the grandmother to report what she had decided on, and back one last time to pay her dollar.

When the girl finally got both her change and the donut holes, she could hardly contain her excitement. As she departed she exclaimed with great enthusiasm, “You don’t need to worry about me returning these donuts. I’m going to love them!”

The Dance of Learning

As I watched this little girl's dance of excitement, I thought about how closely it matched what might have been going on in her mind as she moved back and forth between knowing and confusion, between the joy of making her way in the world and bafflement at how something would actually work out.

Every day in the classroom, I feel as if the children and I do this little dance: I, as I try to understand each child and what that child most needs; and the children, as they learn new concepts, fitting them together with what they already know about the world. The trick of the dance is to hop back and forth between confusion and knowing with light, quick steps so that we are neither flying too fast, trying to absorb too much—nor stuck in place, refusing to evolve in the face of new information.

Doing this dance of learning requires us to take risks, to be willing to give things a try even though we know there is the possibility of failure. When I think of classroom practices around behavior and discipline, I think always of supporting children's risk taking. Creating a positive classroom environment allows children to feel safe about taking risks, and when children feel safe about taking risks, the very quality of their learning goes up.

But how can we find time for a social curriculum, when we're already straining to cover all the academics? I believe it's never a matter of choosing between the academic and the social curriculum. Rather, it's a matter of addressing the social so that we can address the academic, and addressing the academic so that we can address the social.

Children need to know how to take turns, listen, choose respectful words, and use appropriate body language when working together on math problems or doing a group science experiment. They need to know how to read, add and subtract, make charts, and use other academic skills to decide who gets to take the lunch counts this week or how four people can share the paints fairly. If we don't take the time to teach the social curriculum, the academic curriculum is diminished.

Just as it's impossible to separate the social from the academic, it is not easy to speak of rules without considering all the elements of the entire classroom. A commitment to establishing positive behavior expectations and supporting children's efforts at positive behavior is embedded in everything that gives rise to a safe and productive learning community: friendship, collaboration, meaningful work, growth and learning, mental well-being, and physical health and safety. And so, as part of creating a classroom where every child can learn, we establish rules and explicitly teach children how to follow those rules.

In an even larger sense, we are also teaching for the time when we will not be there. The authority of our position rests on this reach beyond the time when students are in our classrooms and our schools. We must therefore use techniques that give children the power to think and act ethically for themselves. Just as we teach children to read so that they might be able to participate in a literate world, so too, we must teach children to care for themselves and others so that they might later participate in a democratic society.

Before School Starts

August: My goals begin to take shape

The rule-creation process described in this book begins with children articulating their learning goals for the year. Like the children, I, too, begin my year by formulating my goals. Along about mid-August, I start to put my classroom in order, hoping to find the perfect way to arrange it. Each year the physical task of arranging the room helps me refocus on the day-to-day life of the classroom, on the children, and on the work we do together. This is when I at last let go of the year before, whether it feels finished or not, and begin to get excited about the year ahead.

As I put the final touches on the room, I dream of what the year might look like. I see children working in all the areas of the room, writing stories, painting pictures, and building grand structures or complicated machines. I see them reading books, playing games, and solving problems together. The room is filled with a busy hum, with friendly exchanges and earnest collaboration. This is when my own goals begin to take shape.

My biggest hope: “I would like us to do fewer things but do them well.”

In my more than thirty years of teaching, I have seen so many changes, both in my own teaching and in the realm of public education itself. I’ve lived through various educational movements, each with its pluses and minuses, each requiring accommodation and training, each adding to the complexity of our educational institutions.

Amid all the demands that society places on teachers’ work, beginning each year with a most important goal has become a key way for me to maintain my own clarity and conviction about my work. One year, my most important goal was to be able to include a child with a severe disability as a full, integral member of the classroom. Another year it was to work more with other teachers. Yet another year it was to focus on literacy routines that would give children the skills they needed while helping them develop their own interests and ideas. This year, my biggest hope is that the children and I will do fewer projects but do them well.

I teach in a building that is beautifully designed. One of its special features is that it feels bigger on the inside than it looks from the outside. I would like our work to be like our building, making us bigger on the inside. I want to avoid filling the day with just the demands and details of someone else’s agenda. I want to have our own sacred class time where children have the leisure to explore, share, discuss, and work together.

I know from experience that this will require me to organize and integrate the curriculum in a way that weaves the much needed skill work into interesting and engaging content areas. I’ll plan on carving out one hour each day that the children and I can count on as “our” work time. As schedules are made, I will keep this time clear so that it is possible for us to do in-depth projects.

As the children begin to express their own goals, which we will call “hopes and dreams,” I will be excited to let them know that I, too, have a most important goal for the year: that the class will be able to do projects together. And as we begin to create the rules, not only will I already have

a vision in my mind of what I'll have to do to allow for these projects, but we as a class will think together about what all of us will need to do to allow for them.

The first family conference: Families share their goals for the year

Once the room is set up and before school starts, it is time to invite the children and their parents in for a tour. Each family comes for a thirty- to forty-minute visit. These visits are also an opportunity for me to find out parents' goals and hopes for their children in the coming year. Before the visits, I send out a query to help parents clarify their thinking, and they bring the completed sheet with them to the visit. (See sample query below.) If parents find filling out the written form intimidating or simply

PARENT QUERY: First Planning Conference

Name of parent(s): _____

Name of student: _____

Please answer the following questions to help us plan your child's program:

1. What is your most important hope for your child in school this year?
2. In what ways or areas would you like to see your child grow socially or emotionally?
3. In what ways or areas would you like to see your child grow academically?

haven't had a chance to fill it out, we do it together during the visit. The information on the sheet helps to focus our conversation on what is most important to parents.

In the early grades, parent goals are often the simple, age-old ones: for kindergartners, to enjoy school and make friends; for first graders, to learn to read; and for second graders, to use their skills to learn about a broader world.

Often parents come with their hopes *and* fears, and leave after the conversation with their fears calmed and the sense of possibility that each new school year brings. Of course it is not always that easy to melt away parent concerns, and so I see these conferences as just a beginning, a way to create an important common ground for our shared work ahead.

Helping families share their expertise

When I invite families into a conversation about the coming year, I also ask for their input as the experts on their children. I ask about the child's special interests, friendships, strengths, how the child tends to handle difficult challenges, and the like.

From the very beginning of the year on, I want to hear from parents what they know about their children so that I can better teach the children. Over the years I have found that though I don't always see the children in the same way as the parents do or always agree with the parents' priorities, this first conference is an important beginning to our working together in a constructive way.

The First Days of School

I always seem to wake up with a start on the first day of school. It's no wonder. This business of formulating goals helps to clarify what I and children's families most want, but it is, after all, only the beginning and there is much hard work still to be done. All the routines and rules have yet to be established. I know that simply having all the children come and sit in a circle can be a challenge.

Establishing routines

It takes a few weeks for young children to understand and adjust to school life, even if they've been in school before. There's so much they need to learn. There are lunch routines, work routines, fire drills, play-ground routines, meeting routines, bathroom routines. During the early weeks of school, all of these need to be carefully taught and practiced.

I introduce many of the routines before we begin the work of creating rules because the routines allow children to navigate the day with a sense of order, purpose, and ease. These beginning routines create the safety and boundaries the children need in order to engage in conversations about creating meaningful rules.

I also find that young children need to have at least a rudimentary understanding of what their new classroom and school year will be like before they can have meaningful thoughts about goals or the creation of rules. The way I introduce and reinforce the routines gives the children a context to draw upon in thinking both about what might be in store for the year and about what rules might be necessary.

The teacher creates the routines

Although I involve the children in many decisions about our daily life in the classroom, I create the routines myself. Empowering children is important, but we need to understand our own responsibilities as the adults in charge. In order to empower children effectively, we have to be clear about the areas we are not willing to let go of, and routines that ensure the smooth running of the day for everyone is one such area.

This is not to say that we shouldn't help children understand the reasons behind the routines. The reasons for raising your hand to talk, walking in a line through the halls, or sitting in a circle in meetings are not obvious to young children who are still egocentric in their thinking.

Sometimes I get students thinking about the reason for a routine by asking questions. "Why do you think we need to line up to get our lunch?" or "Why do we sit in a circle at meeting?" Other times I explicitly tell

Taking Care at Meeting

Everyone comes to meeting.

Bring just yourself.

Listen to each other and take turns.

Sit in your own space.

Use friendly clear voices.

Keep an eye on the person talking.



Guidelines for meetings in a K-1 classroom

children the reason for a routine. “Everybody’s ideas are important. When we take turns talking, we have a chance to hear all ideas.”

I have also found that children are enthralled with the idea of being connected to children everywhere. When I teach them about raising their hand to speak, for instance, I talk not only about wanting to hear everyone’s ideas, but also about children all over the country learning to raise their hand to talk, just as they’re doing. Suddenly children become more interested in raising their hands.

Modeling and practicing until routines are automatic

Because we can't assume that children will know what a routine should look and feel like, modeling is an indispensable step. I might ask, "Who can show me a safe way to line up for lunch?" or "Who can show me a quiet way to walk down the hall?" Everyone who wants to demonstrate gets a turn.

Recently I watched a class of children modeling how they might listen to someone who was sharing. One by one, the children had a chance to show how they would listen. Their faces and their bodies gave the message, "I get it. I can do this. I understand." I could see them almost puff up while the rest of the class watched with rapt attention. It was evident that by simply acting out respectful ways of behaving, the children not only understood what respectful behavior meant, but actually felt respectful.

The next step after modeling routines is to practice them consciously until they become automatic. I say "consciously" because getting a routine down solid is a gradual process that requires us to stop and reflect as a group, deliberately and repeatedly, on how we are doing. We think together about how well we circled up during recess this past week, about whether we're better at stopping and looking at the teacher when we hear the chime signal, about whether there seems to be a new problem in the art cleanup routine. This conscious focusing on our progress helps children remember the importance of routines, identify rough spots, and solve problems together.

Breaking down the routines: Walking through the halls

Early in the process of learning routines, I help the children by giving them more directions and breaking down complex routines into manageable parts.

For instance, during the first week of school, before we walk through the hall I remind the children with words and a gesture that others are working, so they need to "zip up their mouth and tell their feet to walk." I then lead them along in an exaggerated tiptoe to where we are going, frequently stopping to give the thumbs-up signal to let them know they're

doing a great job. If the children become noisy, we stop until everyone is quiet again.

The next week, I might only make the “zip up our mouth” gesture before we begin, stopping the line again if children forget to walk quietly.

Once this step is going smoothly, I give children the challenge of walking on their own. At first I go halfway down the hall and tell them to see if they can bring the line all by themselves to where I am standing. I make sure they will be successful by going only as far as I know they can manage. I then give a thumbs-up signal and go a little farther down the hall so that they can do it again. When this is going well, I go all the way down the hall. Eventually I go out of sight.

When students are able to walk quietly in the halls without me, I know I can walk at the end of the line, and the children will know what to do. Of course they will still forget sometimes, but they understand the expectations, so getting back on track will be all the easier.

This gradual letting go of control on my part and placing it in the hands of the children is an underlying goal of all my teaching. Ultimately I want the children to be independent learners in a social setting.

The “Quiet Place”

In addition to establishing basic classroom routines such as getting quiet at the quiet signal, raising a hand to speak during meetings, circling up, and walking in a line down the hall, we need to give children a structure for comforting themselves when they’re upset. In my classroom, there is a “Quiet Place” for this purpose. This is in addition to the time-out space, which I’ll discuss later in this chapter. Based on ideas in Jane Nelsen’s book *Positive Discipline in the Classroom*, the Quiet Place is a cozy place in the room where children can go voluntarily to be alone and help themselves feel better. (Nelsen, Lott, and Glenn, 2000)

I introduce the Quiet Place during the first week of school. As with the routines, I introduce it before we begin working on the rules because when children see that their own emotional needs will be considered, they are freer to think about the issue of classroom rules.



The “Quiet Place” in Deborah Porter’s K–1 classroom

I never insist that a child go to the Quiet Place, but I frequently suggest it. The spot is especially useful to kindergartners making the transition from home to school and struggling with separation anxiety during the early weeks of school.

Alison, a young five-year-old, had a particularly hard time saying goodbye to her dad. After going through all the usual routines—blowing a kiss, waving goodbye at the window, drawing a picture for her dad—Alison was still distressed. Though upset, she knew what to do. She grabbed her

stuffed animal and made a beeline to the Quiet Place. After ten minutes of cuddling with her stuffy and looking at a book, she joined the group, happily and on her own. Not that Alison wasn't sad the next day when her dad left; but she had a way to help herself feel better.

The room itself

Another important ingredient in developing community and self-control is the room itself. I set up the room to invite interaction among classmates, with tables instead of desks to work at. Eventually, the room will be equipped with a wide range of materials that encourage children to experiment and be creative.

But on the first day of school, there are only a few familiar materials out. Then, in the next few weeks, I'll carefully introduce new materials one by one, guiding children to explore the materials actively and share their discoveries with each other.

My goal in starting with a nearly empty room, however, is not just for the sake of introducing materials. It is also because right from the beginning I want to be able to say "yes" to the children more than I say "no." If the room is full of materials that the children want to use but are not yet able to manage, the first few weeks of school will be one long series of "nos":

"No, you can't knock down your building."

"Don't splatter the paint."

"No, you can't climb that high."

"No, the pattern blocks are not for catapulting."

The refrain will go on and on, punctuating every activity and framing all interactions in the negative. Seeing school as a place of restriction before one is able to see it as a place of possibilities is counter to the active participation that I want to encourage in all children.