

The *Responsive Classroom*® Approach to Discipline



For children to learn the habits and skills of positive behavior, we need to teach discipline explicitly, just as we teach math, science, and other academic subjects. And we must do so in ways that address the causes of children’s behavior struggles. The *Responsive Classroom* approach to discipline does just that.

Using this approach, you establish high—and achievable—expectations for positive behavior and actively teach children how to meet them. When children make mistakes, as they will, this approach also enables you to respond effectively so that children get back on the learning path as quickly as possible.

In this overview, you’ll learn how to:

- ▶ teach positive behavior skills, including teaching children how to meet their own needs in productive ways
- ▶ respond effectively in the moment when misbehavior is taking place, and what to do if the misbehavior continues
- ▶ communicate with students’ families respectfully and effectively about behavior issues

The chapters that follow will then help you to apply these strategies to ten common classroom behaviors.

Proactive Strategies

How to Promote Positive Behavior

Often when we seek help with behavior challenges, we just want to know what to do in the moment—when children are actually misbehaving. What we do in the moment obviously will have an immediate effect; it will also have some effect on students' future actions.

Yet, the steps we take *before* challenging situations arise will have a much more powerful and lasting impact on children. The more time we devote to this proactive work, the more skills children will develop and the more they'll be encouraged by the positive effects of their behavior on themselves and others.

This means that we shouldn't wait for children to make a mistake—and only step in at that point. Instead, we need to proactively build a classroom environment that leads to positive behavior and explicitly teach children positive ways to act. In reality, we should be spending a lot more time on this proactive work than on reacting to misbehaviors so that children develop the behavior “muscles” they need for success in school.

Here are the essential proactive steps to take:

- ▶ Make sure children's basic needs are being met
- ▶ Build a safe, caring community
- ▶ Address students' social-emotional needs
- ▶ Set students up for academic success
- ▶ Establish clear expectations
- ▶ Create class rules
- ▶ Teach the rules and expectations
- ▶ Use positive teacher language

Make sure children's basic needs are being met

When children are hungry, thirsty, tired of sitting still, or distracted by other physical needs, they're less able to maintain self-control. Planning how to meet these needs during the school day is essential to fostering positive behavior and learning.

- ▶ **Water.** Students need to drink water more often than just at lunch and recess. Do you need to provide water bottles or remind students to bring in their own? Do you provide regular access to water fountains?
- ▶ **Food.** Students may also need to eat more often than at breakfast and lunch. Think about whether you need to schedule morning and afternoon snack times or provide a working snack time, such as during reading workshop.
- ▶ **Bathroom breaks.** Do you have a system set up so students can go as needed or take breaks at regular intervals?
- ▶ **Movement.** Physical activity keeps our blood flowing and stimulates our thinking. Think about how you could include movement in academic lessons. For example, could students stand and partner-chat about an assigned question? Schedule movement breaks throughout the day as well, such as a quick, energizing game, three minutes of yoga or stretching, or a brisk walk.

Build a safe, caring community

When students know that we care about them as individuals—what they like and dislike, what their life outside of school is like, what they hope for and fear—they're much more likely to be cooperative and engaged at school. While they'll still misstep at times, they'll do so less frequently and more readily accept redirection or logical consequences.

The same is true when students form bonds with one another. If students know and trust each other, they'll see how their actions can affect everyone in the classroom, not just the teacher or themselves. When they feel that their classmates care about them, their desire to belong, feel signifi-

cant, and have fun will shape their behavior in positive ways. Ultimately, when you create a safe, caring classroom community, that environment will bring forth children's best behavior and enable their optimal learning.

- ▶ **Begin each day with a community-building routine**, such as a morning meeting. You can set this up so that children greet one another, share information about themselves, do an engaging activity, and read a morning message to prepare for the day's learning. Launching the day this way also gives you opportunities to introduce, practice, and reinforce social-emotional and academic skills.
- ▶ **Include community-building activities in academic lessons** to allow students to get to know one another. For example, you can have them write and share about their daily lives. Or structure a math lesson in which students play a math-facts game with a partner or use manipulatives in small groups to solve problems.
- ▶ **Spend time with students outside of the classroom** whenever you can. Sit with them at lunch, play with them at recess, and chat with them as they arrive in the morning and when they leave at the end of the day.
- ▶ **Talk to students one-on-one throughout the day**. Do this for all students, especially those who may push your buttons. They need to know you—and you really need to know them. Try to keep track of whom you've had these conversations with, especially for larger classes, to avoid having some students fall through the cracks.

TEACHING TIP

There's Something to Like in Every Child—
We Just Have to Find It

While it's natural to warm up to some children more quickly than others, it's important that we look for qualities and talents to admire in every child. When we know and appreciate each child as an individual, we're better able to respond with empathy and in ways that build up, rather than diminish, the child.