How we work together as adults to create a safe, joyful, and inclusive school environment is as important as our individual contribution or competence.

Key Responsive Classroom Practices That Support the Adult Community

Positive Community

➤ Share a greeting

➤ Provide opportunities to learn about each other

➤ Participate in unifying activities

Teacher Language

➤ Envisioning language

➤ Reinforcing language

Closings and Structured Reflections

➤ Plusses and Wishes

➤ The Last Word

➤ One Word Around

➤ Just Like Me

Goal-Setting and Establishing Guidelines

➤ Share schoolwide goals

➤ Create individual goals for the school year

➤ Establish guidelines

➤ Revisit!

Academic Choice

➤ Planning

➤ Working

➤ Reflecting

Looking Ahead

What *Responsive Classroom* practices will sustain the positive aspect of the adult community in your school?

What practices will grow the positives in place of challenges?

When and how might you use these practices?

How will you know they are working?

Encouraging Words

by Sarah Fillion • (www.responsiveclassroom.org/info-library)

As a marathoner, I often think about the connections between my challenges as a runner and those of elementary school students. In both arenas, when the going gets tough—whether it's at that 20-mile mark of a marathon or with learning to read—getting encouragement at just the right moment can make all the difference.

I'll always remember how much having people cheering me on helped me when I ran my first marathon in Boston. To this day I still have a pair of "magic" sticks that two little girls were handing out to runners at mile 20. I framed those sticks. I still believe they really were magic—after all, they helped me finish my first marathon.

A colleague of mine, Cindy Kruse, shared a similar experience about the extraordinary power of cheering on her daughter and son-in-law when they ran in the Philadelphia marathon and makes this connection to her work as an educator: "Imagine what we can accomplish if we would adopt this attitude in the classroom—commit to being our students' biggest fans, notice how hard they are working—even when they aren't our own students, cheer them when the going gets tough, even running alongside them to bring them to the finish line . . ."

Reading this, I thought about all the times I needed encouraging words to push through a difficult task and how, at times, those words came from unexpected parties. Having support from family or friends will help you achieve much, but hearing encouraging words from people you don't know well can be even more powerful and revive your belief that you can accomplish anything you want.

As Cindy mentions, adopting the philosophy of encouraging all students in school—whether they're in our class or several grades away—can help children achieve more and feel more successful. And when teachers use encouraging language with students and each other, students will start using that language too. In this way, encouragement and positive reinforcing language can actually transform the climate of a school!

What's an example of a time when your encouragement helped a student? Or when someone else's encouraging words helped you?

Reinforcing Language: Naming Strengths

"Did you notice how many different classmates shared thoughtful questions about the butterflies we observed?" a teacher asks. "What a long list we have!" This teacher knows that children build on their strengths, not their weaknesses. It's important, therefore, to see and name what children do well. With this information, children can grow further.

Reinforcing language, which enables teachers and other school adults to do this naming, is one of the most underused teaching tools. Under the day-to-day pressures of teaching, it's easy to lose sight of or take for granted children's strengths and skills. However, once you've gotten comfortable with this powerful tool, you'll find yourself consistently acknowledging children's positive behaviors.

Characteristics of Reinforcing Language

Reinforcing language can highlight students' skills, attitudes, or work processes or the quality of work products. Teachers using reinforcing language first carefully observe and analyze students' behavior. Then they offer informational feedback that expresses genuine appreciation and respect for children's efforts.

Reinforcing language has the following characteristics:

> ➤ Names concrete and specific behaviors

> ➤ Points out approximations toward mastery

> ➤ May be followed by a question to extend students' thinking

> ➤ Applies to all students

> ➤ Emphasizes description over personal approval

> ➤ Reflects important goals and values

Envisioning Language: Naming Positive Identities

Learning and growth require hard work, and to do that hard work, students need to see themselves as capable people who can behave and achieve in ways beyond their current reality. Helping students form, own, and become excited about this kind of vision of themselves is a fundamental job of teachers, and a key tool for doing this job is envisioning language.

Strong envisioning statements are ones that engage students by speaking to issues they care about, with ideas and words that matter to them. In this post, we share one way to craft such statements: naming positive identities that help all students see (and become) their best selves.

Naming positive identities for students helps them see their potential as learners and motivates them to fulfill that potential. Suppose that on the first day of school, you tell your eager but somewhat anxious first graders, "I see that our classroom is full of good thinkers who are ready to learn. This year, I expect that all of you will find some schoolwork that you'll be able to do easily and some that will require hard work. But we're all good thinkers, so we're all going to learn a lot!"

Naming the students as "good thinkers who are ready to learn" adds power to your vision because it gives students an important, enticing identity. "Yes," they repeat in their heads. "We are good thinkers." Thus primed, they are indeed ready to learn.

Here are some tips to help you name positive identities in a way that recognizes where students are and where, with their effort and your support, they can go.

Believe Your Own Words

Naming students as good thinkers, or offering them any other positive identity, works only if your words are backed by deep conviction—if, in the preceding example, you truly believe that all children are good thinkers in different ways and begin school eager to succeed as learners.

For another example, suppose your sixth grade students have formed their project teams and are raring to go on their DNA extraction projects. "Teams that collaborate well," you remind them, "will be able to make the most of our work time. Talk in your groups for a minute about what you'll do to be effective collaborators." You've set a clear and positive goal for the class by identifying them as potential "effective collaborators," but they'll want to live up to this positive image of themselves only if they sense that you truly believe they can.

Avoid Naming Negative Identities

Sometimes, without thinking, we name a negative identity along with a positive one, like this: "I'm hoping for hard workers instead of lazy workers." That statement could imply that we currently see students as lazy. And once students hear a negative identity, they may have a hard time imagining themselves with the positive one. Or they may become resentful and unwilling to work toward the positive vision.

A straightforward positive statement works much better: "I know that you can all work hard and learn a lot, and I'm here to help you do that."

Be Inclusive

Imagine a fifth grade teacher who shares a vision of gym class as "Boys and girls, skaters and jocks, all being friendly to each other." The intention—to reassure students that everyone has an equal place in the school community—is positive, but the words reinforce the very divisions and stereotypes the teacher wants to overcome.

Far more effective is a simple sentence such as "In this class and in this school, everybody will feel welcomed and included by everybody else."

Keep Trying

Learning how to name positive identities for students takes time and practice. Be patient with yourself and persist, even when you make mistakes—just as you encourage students to do. You'll soon find yourself using these envisioning statements fluently and frequently.