

Prevent challenging behavior: Teach expectations directly

“What is so hard about walking in a straight line?”

“Was that boy raised in a barn? Doesn’t he know that he needs to wash his hands after using the toilet?”

“Why is she always so whiny at school?”



If we find ourselves facing challenging behaviors in children, we need to consider how we can address them proactively. In our experience, it is better to prevent behaviors through proactive strategies than to intervene with challenging behaviors later.

We can reduce challenging behaviors by directly teaching classroom rules and expectations (Evertson et al. 2000; Fox et al. 2003; Hester et al. 2009; Scott et al. 2007; Stormont et al. 2008).

Experienced teachers provide instruction on the variety of skills that they want children to learn. We teach them to count, rhyme, share, and say “please” and “thank you.” Just as we teach those important skills, we need to provide planned instruction on how to act in our classrooms.

Many children do not know what we want them to do and may behave inappropriately simply because they do not understand our expectations. The rules of school are not intuitive and can be contrary to the rules in many children’s homes.

Children also need to learn procedures about how to follow each rule. What is acceptable in my home or classroom may not be the same expectation in yours. We cannot assume that children know how to demonstrate each rule and procedure. We cannot expect them to know something that we did not teach them.

How do we teach behavioral expectations? We teach them in the same way that we teach any academic skills (Evertson et al. 2000; Stormont et al.

2008). As most experienced teachers know, there are seven steps to teaching a lesson:

1. Get children interested in the lesson.
2. Provide the input to them.
3. Model the skill.
4. Have children practice the skills together.
5. Have children practice the skill individually.
6. Provide regular feedback.
7. Review and reteach.

Use these extended examples to build your teaching skills and to reinforce your behavioral expectations.

1. Get students excited to learn our expectations. We can do this though telling a story or playing a game. We like to tell the story of Peter Pig through the use of stick puppets:

Peter is in kindergarten at a school just across town from us. It’s his very first time in school. He really wants to make friends and learn how to do many new things, so he tries very hard. Peter does cartwheels across the class-



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room, jumps on the art table, takes snacks from the other children and gives them some of his snack, and sings “If You’re Happy and You Know It” while using the restroom.

Our students laugh about Peter’s antics and then say that they don’t think that Peter is making the right choices.

2. Tell students what we want them to do.

Once our students are engaged in the lesson, we tell them, clearly and specifically, the rules and expectations for our classroom. Classroom rules need to be positively stated. We tell children what we want them to do, not what we don’t want them to do.

Additionally, we need only three to five rules that are easy to understand and encompass our expectations (Hester et al. 2009, Stormont et al. 2008). Each rule includes a variety of expectations and routines. Our recommendations for classroom rules are the following:

1. Be respectful.
2. Be responsible.
3. Be honest.

In our experience, every behavior that we expect in our classrooms falls under these three rule categories.

“Be respectful” includes respecting ourselves, classmates, adults, and property. It encompasses common classroom expectations, such as sharing, taking turns, using kind words, and keeping hands to ourselves.

“Be responsible” means putting away the toys and learning materials, putting trash in the wastebasket,

walking in a straight line in the hallway, and washing hands after using the restroom.

“Be honest” means that we expect our students to be truthful at all times. We say what happened, without making up or leaving out anything. We ask permission before using things that don’t belong to us. We keep promises and, if we can’t, we explain why.

CLASSROOM RULES NEED TO BE POSITIVELY STATED.

Once we have created classroom rules, we post them in a prominent area of the classroom. We recommend posting the rules near the circle time carpet so that children will be sure to see them many times each day. For young children, we write the rules in words but also include a visual reminder for non-readers. You may want to give examples of what each rule may look like in your classroom.

3. Show students what we want them to do. One of the most effective strategies for teaching new skills is modeling (Evertson et al. 2000; Hester et al. 2009; Stormont 2002). Children often learn better when they watch someone else perform the task. We can model by performing the actions ourselves or by using puppets or stuffed animals. We model both the expected behaviors and the unacceptable behaviors.

One strategy that often works well is to make it a game. We make our puppets perform an action, and children tell us whether or not the puppet is following the rules. Then we ask which rule the puppet is following or breaking. We have the puppet perform common challenging behaviors, as well as silly behaviors, such as standing on his head while walking down the hall. Doing so keeps the game fun and engaging.

4. Practice the desired behaviors as a group. Once we have shown children the behaviors we expect, we give them the chance to practice (Evertson et al. 2000). Initially, we practice as a

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group. It may sound silly, but research indicates that practicing the desired behaviors will give our students “motor memory” for doing what we want.

For the “Be responsible” rule, for example, we may assign a pair of children to each learning center to tidy up the materials—put the blocks on the shelves, clear the table in the dramatic play center, and wash the paintbrushes in the art center. While children are practicing, we need to provide frequent feedback.

5. Have students individually practice the desired behaviors. For individual practice, children can take turns showing a particular rule to one another or to the entire group. A child may demonstrate the procedure for washing hands, for example. Referring to a poster by the sink, a child will wet his hands, apply soap, scrub for 15 seconds (as long as it takes to sing *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*), rinse, wipe with a paper towel, and throw the towel in the wastebasket.

6. Provide frequent feedback. Children need to hear immediately if they are behaving correctly. While children are practicing the behavior and when they have completed it, we point out what they did well and what needs improvement. For some students, an individual success chart with visuals and daily schedule may be warranted. Remember that all children learn differently and need different strategies, just as we do.

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Once we have taught the behaviors, we expect children to follow them all day, every day. The behaviors will no longer be a part of our lessons, but rather a part of our classroom environment.

It is unrealistic, however, to expect that children will behave perfectly. Particularly at the beginning of the school year, they need to hear that they are doing well or that their actions do not quite meet expectations. Recognize individual effort as well as that of the class as a whole. Focus the feedback on the positive choices children are making.

At the same time, we need to provide frequent and consistent consequences for students who choose not to follow the classroom rules. If we decide that a student who touches others in circle time must sit next to the teacher, that consequence must apply every day and for every teacher in the classroom. Otherwise, children will learn that rules apply only sometimes and may choose not to follow them (Evertson et al. 2000).

7. Review and practice on a regular basis.

Children will sometimes forget the classroom expectations, as they forget academic skills. For that reason, we review behavioral expectations throughout the school year with short mini-lessons (Hester et al. 2009). These lessons will often take one or two minutes and can easily be a part of circle time or class meetings.

Approaching classroom behavior management as a skill to be taught instead of a problem to be solved is generally more effective at changing undesirable behaviors in our classrooms. Research indicates that this approach will lead to appropriate behaviors by about 85 percent of children.

Of course, no behavior management plan is perfect, and there will occasionally still be some behavioral challenges in our classrooms. Just like us, children will have a bad day sometimes and make mistakes.

While we will certainly face behavioral challenges in our classrooms, directly teaching our rules and expectations will significantly reduce those challenges.

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About the authors

Marla J. Lohmann, PhD, taught both infants/toddlers and elementary special education in Houston. Her doctoral dissertation research, completed at the University of North Texas in Denton, looked at Texas preschool teachers' levels of preparedness for managing challenging behavior. She is currently an assistant professor of special education at Colorado Christian University.

Natalie M. Nenovich, MEd, has taught special education in the Plano Independent School District for 13 years, at both the preschool and elementary levels. She received a master's degree in special education in autism intervention at the University of North Texas, and is currently completing a doctorate in special education at UNT, with a focus on behavioral disorders. ■