

How to Develop Positive Classroom Management

by [Evantheia Schibsted](#)

Special Options

A recent report found that educators believe that the secret to effective discipline is proactively building relationships, not reacting punitively to student misbehavior. In surveys with 300 New York City public school teachers that included an open-ended question about the largest threat to school safety, the most common response was a lack of cohesive culture and positive relationships between staff and students. (Download a [PDF of the report, "Teachers Talk: School Culture, Safety and Human Rights."](#) [2])

Additional key findings highlighted teachers' belief in positive approaches that emphasize social and emotional learning over punitive discipline:

- Most teachers feel that educators can address even major threats to safety, such as gangs, fights, and student conflict, only by building positive relationships within the school.
- Less than 45 percent of teachers said that suspensions are effective, while 80 percent said that classroom-management training, conflict resolution, guidance counseling, and mediation are effective for improving discipline.

But how do busy and often undersupported teachers go about building strong relationships with students and developing positive methods of conflict resolution? In the interest of igniting a dialog about what works in classroom management, we've gathered the following discipline tips from educators.

As with any series of principles for a complex topic, though, this is only a starting point. The end point, to the degree it can be reached at all, lies in your classrooms. We know that even strategies that work don't work all the time, and sometimes it feels like nothing works at all.

So now we want to hear from you. [Let us know](#) [3] what you've tried that's worked, and when and how; what you've learned; and what you're still learning. Together, we can build a vision for a peaceful and effective 21st-century classroom.

Here are some tips for starters:

Agree on Classroom Rules at the Beginning of the Year

Taking time out for this simple step can prevent a lot of misery in the long term. Experienced educators suggest engaging students actively in the process of determining a set of class rules. Taking this preventative measure creates a positive climate from the start.

Check in with Students at the Start of Class

Even three minutes can make a difference. You can do this by asking questions, such as, "What do you want to get out of class today?" Teachers can weigh in with their goals for class, too.

"This is a chance for the teacher, while still maintaining control of a classroom, to share with students at their level," says Liz Sullivan, coauthor of the "Teachers Talk" report and education program director at the [National Economic and Social Rights Initiative](#) [4]. "Have each kid give a short answer. It's a way to communicate with them. Making them feel like a part of the process sets a positive tone."

Be Consistent About Expectations

This can be the biggest challenge for individuals to address, but it's important to keep in mind that school staff should work together as much as possible to foster consistency in expectations, and discipline methods, throughout the school.

"Sometimes, staff inadvertently set up gaps," explains Nancy Franklin, a veteran educator with more than a decade of classroom experience who now provides training and support for the [Los Angeles Unified School District's Positive Behavior Support policy](#) [5]. "Students may think, 'If I go to this teacher, I get this answer, but if I go to the principal, I get another answer.' It's like a kid who gets different answers from Mom and Dad."

Reinforce Appropriate Behavior

"When you are in a classroom with a teacher who reinforces positive behavior, kids calm down," says Franklin. "Think four positives to any corrective feedback."

Franklin argues that correcting students is the weakest way of teaching rules. "It's not about 'Gotcha -- you did it the wrong way; here's the right way,'" she says. "Students need to be able to trust you and feel safe. That enables them to experience emotional health and flourish."

Maintain Student Dignity

When corrections are necessary, experts suggest handling situations quietly and calmly. Don't make a big deal in front of the whole class.

"An approach to discipline that is respectful of human rights and maintains student dignity leads to a school that is inherently safe," says former teacher

Sally Lee, coauthor of "Teachers Talk" and executive director of the New York City organization [Teachers Unite](#) [6]. "A school in which students and teachers don't feel safe creates a fearful environment. And where there is a fearful environment, there are low expectations for discipline."

Be Neutral, Not Accusatory

When problems arise, don't ask, for example, "'Why did you take Sally's pencil?" This approach often provokes defensive comebacks such as, "She was mean to me." Instead, ask what happened, opening the way for students to tell their story. Follow up with questions such as "How do you think that made Sally feel?"

Look for the Cause

It's a good idea to notice when students act out, educators advise. Does it happen only when the child is doing math or reading? Identifying when problems occur may help you recognize the reason.

Similarly, it's helpful to figure out what the underlying problem is. "If it's a skill deficit, a kid doesn't know how to behave," says Joseph Ryan, a special education researcher at Clemson University who has worked in schools for disabled children. "If it's a performance deficit, the kid knows what to do but needs motivation."

Establish a Fairness Committee

"Often, a person who is acting out wants to make amends for what they've done," says Josh Heisler, a teacher at New York City's [Vanguard High School](#) [7]. "They won't feel right until they fix the problem."

Heisler's school set up a fairness committee of teachers and students that promotes a restorative approach, rather than a punitive one, to righting wrongs: Instead of directing offenders to the principal's office or threatening suspensions, teachers let them tell their side of the story to the committee and, hopefully, make amends. When the committee convenes, it asks students questions ranging from "What happened?" and "Who else has been affected?" to "What do you need to do now to repair the harm?"

Share Your Experience

What would you add to this list? Do you have specific examples of how you've achieved these goals -- or others? We want to know.

Evantheia Schibsted is a New York freelancer who contributes to *Edutopia*. Her articles have also appeared in the *New York Times* and *Wired*, on ABCNEWS.com, and in or on other publications and Web sites.

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