

Early Childhood Classroom Management Using Research and Evidenced-Based Strategies

Teaching children social and emotional skills during the early childhood years is critical for later success in school and in life. Research substantiates that healthy social emotional development is an essential ingredient for future academic success. To teach children social and emotional skills, most teachers use one of two approaches to classroom management or a combination of them both: 1) proactively teaching children how to manage their relationships and environments by teaching social and emotional skills, or 2) discouraging children's misbehavior with consequences and punishments such as "time out" or stoplight (red light, green light) systems.

Proactively teach children how to manage their emotions

Self regulation and social skills develop over time within an environment that is predictable, structured, age-appropriate, responsive and caring. Teachers must proactively teach children the acceptable behaviors and provide experiences that develop self regulation skills. Like emergent reading and math skills, social and emotional skills and self regulation skills need time, intentional teaching, appropriate environments and differentiated instruction for individual needs.

Effective management of behavior should always start with praise and encouragement and "catching the child being good." It is essential that young children have warm, positive and nurturing relationships with teachers that encourage positive self-concepts. Evidence-based supports for building self regulation and classroom community include techniques such as praise and encouragement, intentionally teaching friendship and community skills like taking turns, sharing, learning about emotions, conflict resolution and problem solving. When these methods are provided within a safe, predictable and age appropriate environment, children develop a healthy social-emotional foundation. For information on how to implement these strategies see <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/module1/script.pdf>.

Set clear rules

Establishing classroom rules supports pro-social behaviors. No more than 4 or 5 rules should be developed with the children at the beginning of the year. When children play an active role in creating the rules, they are more inclined to understand and follow the rules. Rules should be few, clear, short and positive with phrases like "Walking feet" rather than "No running" and should include a picture next to the rule. Teachers must be very specific when directing children, e.g., after giving a one minute warning "*place the toys back on the shelf where you are playing and then take a seat at circle.*" Rules should be displayed at children's eye level all year long and referred to and discussed often, pointing to the written statement and the picture.

Stay away from time out and stoplight systems

Time-out and stoplight systems ("red, yellow, green light") may provide a quick fix to quieting a challenging behavior in the classroom but each have significant shortcomings. Timeout removes children until they "cool down," but fails to teach the children replacement skills. The stoplight method offers a warning system for inappropriate behavior, but does not work if the child gets a red light at the beginning of the day. After one or two red lights or infractions early in the day, the child will learn that her behavior for the rest of the day does not really matter. Her challenging behaviors will persist, and by the end of the day, the teacher will be exhausted, her classmates will be afraid of the out-of-control behaviors and the child will learn that she is the "bad" child.

Ticket s and tokens

Some schools use tickets and tokens to motivate young children to follow the classroom rules. It is unlikely to be an effective method for young children because many children will not make a clear connection between the ticket/token and their positive actions. The best approach for young children is positive, natural outcomes, high level of engagement and positive descriptive feedback from a caring adult. "We did a great job at putting our toys neatly away today. Now we have some extra time and can go on an adventure walk around the neighborhood." Also, with young children avoid taking something away for rule infractions. This is an approach that is only effective for students who are socially mature and already have consistent behavior.

If a school is participating in a whole school reward system, make sure that preschool and early childhood classrooms earn concrete, meaningful rewards that have a logical connection to classroom practice. You might

substitute a whole school sticker rewards system with a class reward that connects to a classroom project or study. For example, children who are working on a tree study work cooperatively to paint a large class tree mural. Then when children participate in a positive behavior, each child gets to decorate a leaf and help the positive behavior tree grow. The teacher needs to ensure that every child in the classroom participates in “caught being good” and helps the behavior tree grow with a new leaf. When the tree fully “blossoms” with positive behaviors, the class purchases a real tree together to plant on school grounds. See: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/module2/script.pdf>

Turn to the resources found at the Center for Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) or Technical Assistance Center for Social Emotional Interventions (TACSEI) when challenging behaviors persist.

Even with the most appropriate environments and intentional teaching, there will be times when some children may need additional supports for challenging behaviors. Stress from home, misunderstandings with a friend, sickness, lack of sleep or food, not understanding the language spoken in the classroom, and allergies can all trigger challenging behaviors. When that happens, teachers can employ strategies such as distraction, redirection, withdrawal of non-productive attention and the use of positive behavior supports all while teaching replacement pro-social skills. For additional information on these strategies including creating positive behavior plans (PBS) for individual children, see: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/module3a/script.pdf>