

# The Secret to Classroom Management—No Matter Where You Teach

Our students—like all of us—are often facing invisible challenges. Empathize first, and the rest will follow.

Elizabeth Peyton on May 6, 2019

**A student shows up late.**

**"You okay? We missed you."**

I've been teaching middle school for 12 years. I've been in an urban school in which 99 percent of students receive free lunch for nine of those years. And I've tried a lot of classroom management strategies with varying degrees of success.

I've tried policing the small stuff so I wouldn't have to deal with the big stuff. I've tried establishing classroom procedures and sticking to them, but I can never remember if two fingers raised means a student needs to use the restroom or has a question. I set up a positive reward system and gained five pounds from fun-size Hershey bars.

These strategies work well for some teachers I know, but here's the secret I've found for effective classroom management. You ready? It's pretty simple.

## **Always default to compassion.**

A kid shows up late. "Everything okay? We missed you."

A kid doesn't have his homework for the fourth time this week. "Hey, is something going on that's making it hard for you to get your work done? This is really important, and I want to make sure you're able to do what you need to do."

A kid throws a tantrum in class. "Wow, you're really struggling with self-control. Can you tell me why? Are you hungry or tired?"

## **Starting with compassion increases the odds that you'll find out what's really going on.**

A couple of years ago, one of my girls stopped doing her homework and paying attention in class. As a new teacher, I'd have assigned a detention and hoped that solved the problem.

Instead, I asked her what was going on. I found out that her dad—her sole surviving parent—had been arrested the week before for driving without a license. This seventh grader had been living on her own for close to a week, and getting herself to school on time every single day, but the food was running out and she was hungry and afraid. We bought her groceries and bailed her dad out, and her grades went right back to where they should have been.

### **Compassion builds relationships with your students.**

Taking a more aggressive approach might burn bridges. Will they see you as a sucker? Yeah, it's possible. But they'll know that you're a sucker who loves them and cares about their needs outside of school, and that counts for a lot.

You might worry that defaulting to compassion will encourage kids to make up a sob story to get out of doing their work or behaving. And I'll admit that this has happened to me once or twice. Last year, a kid explained that he never had his homework because he was in charge of looking after his little brothers at night and putting them to bed, and he didn't pay attention in class because there was never food for breakfast. We scheduled a conference with his mom. She brought in a delicious homemade breakfast burrito—which he refused to eat because he doesn't like black beans—and informed us that he didn't even have little brothers.

As long as you follow up with what the kid claims he or she needs, you'll generally find the truth. And I'd argue that if you're going to make mistakes—and you are definitely going to make mistakes—it's better to err on the side of understanding than to be overly harsh.

### **We read a lot about the school-to-prison pipeline and the needlessly punitive discipline policies we inflict on our most vulnerable students.**

Compassion is the way out. I don't promise it'll solve all your classroom management problems, but it'll go a long way. Treat a kid like a decent person and, more often than not, he or she will act like one.

# 7 Classroom Management Techniques That Really Work

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See the positive results of positive reinforcement.

WeAreTeachers Staff on April 4, 2019

When you watch a teacher with great classroom management techniques, it can feel like magic. The truth is that classroom management can be learned. Reading about classroom management, asking other teachers what they do, and even talking with your principal about what they have observed can help. Here are seven things to consider in your quest for classroom management excellence.

## 1. Build relationships.

This is hands down the most effective classroom management technique. When a student trusts their teacher, they make more of an effort to follow the rules. When teachers make an effort to get to know each student on a more personal basis, they get more out of their teaching experience as well. Each class should feel more like a family. If you don't know how to [pronounce each child's name correctly](#), use sarcasm regularly, and make students feel dumb for asking questions, you need to change those behaviors first.

## 2. Make positive phone calls home.

Another important classroom management technique is the positive phone call home. It's very easy to get into the habit of calling home only when there is an issue to report. While these calls are necessary and worthwhile, calls home for celebration are equally, if not more, important. Every parent wants to hear positive news about their child, and this reinforcement almost always makes its way back to the student. Try to make one positive call to a different student's home every single day, even if it's simply to report on a nice comment a kid made in class. This means so much to parents and students and usually translates to positive classroom behavior as well.

## 3. Celebrate hard work.

Show students that you value the work they put into learning. Identify milestones in the work everyone is accomplishing each day. Once a week, choose one particularly hardworking team or student to share their story. Let the class ask them how they accomplished the work. What a valuable lesson kids learn when they hear peers talking about what hard work means to them. Kids who know their work will be celebrated instead of just their grades will pay more attention and stay focused.

## 4. Maintain authority all year long.

You meant it when you started the year, but it's easy to relax a bit as the year moves along. When you tell kids to stop talking and get back to work but you don't follow through, you tell them it doesn't matter that much. This can lead to teachers raising their voices and saying things they regret. You don't have to be mean, you just have to mean it. So make a list of rules that are effective and really matter to you and then share them with your students. Post them visibly and refer to them often.

#### 5. Make sure that students know what your rules mean.

Just because you've stated them, shared them, and posted them, doesn't mean students know what they mean. Your version of no talking might be different from theirs. Human beings talk for lots of reasons, so keep your expectations appropriate. It might even be okay to joke around a bit as long as a student is staying focused on the task at hand. Some teachers find great success with acting out ways of talking that are effective.

#### 6. Accommodate all learners.

Make sure every one of your students is able to learn the way you plan to teach. This means reviewing [IEP and 504 plans](#) and taking notes on the recommendations so you can take them into account. Share your fears and concerns with the special ed team. So many classroom management challenges can be averted by considering and planning for the needs in your classroom. Make it a point to share the individual accommodation with each student affected so they know there's a plan too. Understanding procedures and consequences may be just what a child with a behavior problem needs in order to feel more in control of their impulses. Remember to design lessons that challenge everyone in the way they need to be challenged.

#### 7. Be prepared.

Even if you aren't required to submit lesson plans, it doesn't mean you shouldn't do them. There's a lot to manage throughout the day, and not knowing what you are supposed to be teaching can easily destroy a good day. Develop plans that work for your teaching style, accommodate all learners, go along with curriculum standards, and pique the curiosity of your students. It may sound daunting, but the more you do it, the better you'll get. A well-planned day can make the difference between tired and flat-out exhausted.

In order to really manage your classroom well, you need to be able to sell your classroom. You aren't just a teacher, you're a performer and a marketer. When kids feel your passion and know where the learning is headed, they'll be pumped to rise to the occasion. Each year can be the year that the students in your class never forget.