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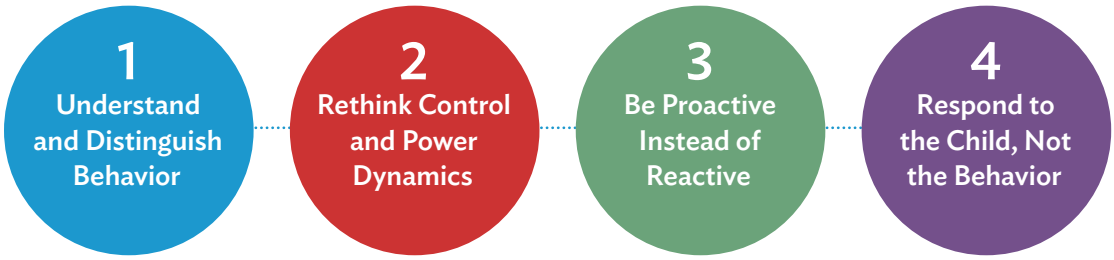
Reframing Classroom Management: A Toolkit for Educators

Effective classroom management is critical to supporting student engagement and achievement. You can spend hours crafting a creative, engaging, standards-aligned lesson, but that lesson will be of little use if taught in a chaotic or unsafe classroom. In a 2013 study, The New Teacher Project found that teachers identified classroom management mistakes as the most common barrier to great teaching. In a survey administered by Teaching Tolerance during spring 2016, over 45 percent of teachers who responded indicated that they had wanted to leave the profession at one point because of classroom management and behavioral issues.

Educators agree that classroom management is important, but our survey revealed that few teachers are explicitly trained beyond cursory traditional approaches (which can actually exacerbate behavior problems). This toolkit seeks to reframe classroom management by questioning the assumption that teachers must always lead and be in control and that students must always follow. This model supports teachers in responding to student behavior with the goal of keeping learning on track rather than keeping absolute control. It focuses on student development instead of punishment.

We created this model—and the accompanying recommendations—with input from over 1,200 teachers across the country.



1. Understand and Distinguish Behavior

All behavior is communication aimed at meeting a need. Although a student's behavior may not be an appropriate way for them to get their need met, they engage in it because—on some level—it works for them. Determining the function of a behavior is essential in developing a response or intervention. Understanding the reasons behind behaviors also allows teachers to focus on prevention, as opposed to punishment.

Not all behaviors call for the same response. For example, three common types of misbehavior—disrespect, disruption and disregard for rules (the "three Ds")—indicate different needs and require different intervention strategies. Properly understanding and distinguishing behaviors also reduces the likelihood that teachers will personalize student misbehavior.

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2. Rethink Control and Power Dynamics

It is fairly common for adults to experience bad days and to test boundaries, but the expectations we place on children often don't allow for these natural behaviors. Instead, we insist that young people adhere strictly to our rules and allow themselves to be "managed." The term *management* itself is problematic because it relies on unbalanced power dynamics and assumes that all students are developmentally the same and capable of learning within the boundaries we've established. Reframing classroom management requires an understanding of what is realistic to expect of the whole child based on what we know of their personal circumstances, the message their behavior sends and their developmental level. Children enter classrooms with unique personalities and challenges; these factors must influence educators' assessments of how to support student success within the classroom community.

The term *management* also misplaces emphasis on training and control rather than collaboration with students. Responsive classrooms are shared community spaces where students are growth partners and leaders of their own learning. Research indicates that excessive control undermines student motivation and development and creates reluctant compliance instead of the excitement that comes from self-determination.

3. Be Proactive Instead of Reactive

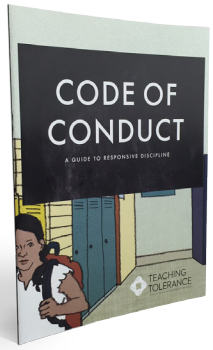
Reactive management strategies such as punishment have a significant connection to elevated teacher stress and off-task student behavior. In the same way educators learn to teach academic skills, we must also learn to teach classroom-ready behaviors so students become self-disciplined and self-directed instead of relying on authority. This vision of classroom dynamics calls for preventative steps such as building relationships and fostering engagement rather than meting out punishment after misbehavior occurs. Simple strategies such as greeting students outside your classroom can have profound impacts on behavior. Positive behavior support is one approach to proactively nurturing classroom-ready behavior.

4. Respond to the Child, Not the Behavior

Responsive classroom management honors the whole child, respects their identities and experiences, and acknowledges their critical role in the classroom community. It also seeks to decode behavior rather than focus exclusively on power and control.

Returning the classroom to order by any means necessary may seem desirable in the short term, but harsh or punitive classroom management practices actually exacerbate behavioral problems by fostering resentment and humiliation; they also do nothing to change the environment or to address the underlying and unexpressed needs of the child. Research indicates students lose respect for teachers who discipline them in a dismissive or punitive way and are also more likely to misbehave in their classes.

When teachers engage in dialogue with students and create spaces where it is safe to make mistakes and learn from them, students are better equipped to understand and regulate their emotions and improve their problem behaviors.



This toolkit builds upon previous resources Teaching Tolerance has published to help educators shift their thinking about school discipline. For more information, see *Code of Conduct* and "A Teacher's Guide to Rerouting the School-to-Prison-Pipeline."

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Functions and Explanations of Student Behavior

All behavior is communication. Social scientists view behaviors as serving functions or purposes. Each student's behavior is a puzzle educators are tasked with solving. As soon as we know the function or purpose of a behavior, we can design interventions that teach students how to meet their needs in more appropriate ways.

You can remember the four most common needs driving student behavior by using the acronym **EATS**.
Escape: Students engage in inappropriate behaviors to try to escape a task or situation they find aversive.
Attention: Students engage in inappropriate behaviors to gain or escape attention from peers or teachers. (This can include negative attention.)
Tangible gains: Students engage in inappropriate behaviors to gain access to a preferred activity or object.
Sensory needs: Students engage in inappropriate behaviors to meet a sensory or internal need that may be difficult to detect from the outside.

STUDENT BEHAVIOR	EXAMPLE	POSSIBLE NEED
Distracting others, making unnecessary noise	Rashad is often disruptive during silent reading, making noises that make his peers laugh.	Attention
Not listening, not following directions	Savannah sweeps materials off her desk and stomps on the ground each time she is asked to transition from a work station to independent seat work.	Escape
Talking back, being disrespectful	Each time Juan enters the classroom late and the teacher tells him to go to the office for a pass, Juan argues with her, eventually calling her a "b**ch" and slamming the door as he exits the classroom.	Attention, Escape
Physical aggression	Eli struggles to make friends in class and often appears to be "pushing the buttons" of peers. It is not uncommon for him to push other students when in line, causing multiple children to fall.	Tangible, Sensory
Fidgeting	Chris often drums his pencil on his desk. Sometimes he appears aware of this behavior, but other times he does not. The noise distracts his classmates and annoys his teacher.	Sensory

**This chart shows some common student behaviors and the needs they function to address. It is important to remember that each student is a dynamic and complex individual and that the same behavior may indicate different needs in different students. It is up to the teacher to determine the need and the appropriate intervention.*

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Eight Practices to Foster Empathy

Choose empathy. Empathy is not a feeling or a predetermined character trait; it is a choice to change your perspective. Discuss this choice with your students. Actively engage your class in an assignment like "Developing Empathy" that helps them put themselves in someone else's shoes. Engaging students in experiences and circumstances different from their own helps them build bridges between misconception and understanding.

Understand that respect is subjective. Have a conversation with your students about what respect means to them. Stanford researchers found that teachers often view respect in terms of cooperation and compliance, while for students, respect often means "basic recognition of your humanity." This includes the teacher knowing the student's name (and pronouncing it correctly), not embarrassing them in front of their peers and expressing interest in their perspective.

Recognize barriers to empathy. The children who need the most love often show it in the most unloving ways. Studies by Russell A. Barkley show that students who have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, for example, have underdeveloped emotional regulation, which is a barrier to social, emotional and academic success.

Explain why you are there. Show passion. Explicitly explain to students that you are there to prepare them for their future. Don't be afraid to tell them about your own life. Letting students in will help build their empathy as well as a mutual, caring relationship.

Give an "I Wish My Teacher Knew" assignment. Giving students an outlet to tell you about themselves can yield remarkable results. Students may not be comfortable sharing their thoughts in front of the class or out loud, but they might be willing to write them down. Take time to reflect on what your students want you to know and how that can inform your practice.

Model empathy. Dealing with students all day can be frustrating, especially when you are repeating the same set of directions or reviewing rules on a daily basis. Consider the empathetic perspective, described by Chad Donahue in "Give the Kid a Pencil," as a means to push past frustration and toward unconditional understanding.

Reverse the Golden Rule. Every teacher has used some version of the saying "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Rephrasing this as a question can help evoke empathy from your students (i.e., "How would you feel if she did that to you?")

Incorporate immersion, problem solving, group play and collaboration. Students who work, solve problems and play together are more likely to empathize with their classmates. Build these activities into a daily routine to allow students optimal time to practice empathy skills.

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Six Phrases That Disempower Students—and How to Flip Them

1. "I get paid regardless."
Saying this to students communicates that you are not interested or invested in their education. Instead, try *I'm not going to give up on you*, or *I'm here for you every day.*

2. "You know what you did!"
Use this moment as an opportunity to explicitly and directly review and reteach rules. Try *Let's review our rules*, or *I noticed that you ___. Next time ___ .*

3. "If you had been paying attention, you would know!"
Students miss directions and assignments for all kinds of reasons; don't assume that it was for lack of caring. You can transfer the responsibility back to them by saying, *Start by asking a classmate for help. If you still need clarification, I'm here.*

4. "What is wrong with you?"
Saying this to a child implies—publicly—that something *is* wrong with them. If you have the urge to ask what is wrong with a child, instead try asking yourself, *What has this child been through?*

5. "We always..."
Instead of using an exasperated tone, try to help the student recall the order or routine. Helping them by saying, *What do we do after we ___?* to encourage them to look for the answer on their own.

6. "In *my* classroom..."
A learning community that maximizes student engagement belongs to everyone, not just the teacher. Try, *I like that in our classroom, we ___ .*

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Teacher Habits That Can Make Behavior Worse

Power struggles If you engage in a public battle with a student, you have already lost. Some students will say or do anything to avoid defeat or humiliation in front of their peers.

Favoritism A student who feels they have lesser status in the eyes of the teacher will respond accordingly. Withdrawal or misbehavior is often the result of not feeling respected or liked.

Hostile body language Children are experts in nonverbal communication. Take an honest look at how your posture changes depending on how you're feeling or who you're talking to.

Restricting recess as punishment Physical exercise reduces symptoms experienced by students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)—yet students with ADHD are among the most likely to have recess taken away.

Punishing entire class Holding students accountable when they were not part of the disruption undermines mutual respect in the classroom. Arbitrarily meting out punishment can cause students to feel insecure and distrustful.

Failing to forgive Students should be able to redeem themselves, correct their behavior and rejoin the classroom community. Start each day new and without judgment about the past. Starting a student's day on "red," for example, sends a wordless message that you see the student as a problem and undermines their motivation to correct their behavior.

Personalizing student behavior Student behavior is most accurately viewed as communication about a young person's needs, not a personal statement about an educator's teaching or personality.

Exempting yourself from the rules In a collaborative classroom, the rules apply to everyone. Don't talk on your cell phone or eat in class if these behaviors are against the rules for students.

Making too many rules A classroom that is too rigid will demoralize students and can even lead to rebellion. Keep the list of rules clear, broad and short.

Passing the buck Resolve as many issues as possible in your classroom. Sending kids to the office or another room relinquishes your power as the instructional leader. Students need to receive the message that you care about resolving issues within the classroom community.

HOSTILE BODY LANGUAGE

"I had a student who consistently showed defiance and refused to follow my rules. After many efforts to win him over and curb his behavior, I called for the AP to remove him. He said to the AP later, 'She doesn't like me.' And I thought about that and found that I probably did not greet him as enthusiastically as I did his classmates. I didn't smile at him as much because I was always expecting the worst."

FAILING TO FORGIVE

"Start fresh each day and apologize when you are wrong."

PERSONALIZING STUDENT BEHAVIOR

"If you can step back and not emotionally react to misbehavior, it helps immensely."

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Setting low expectations Given the opportunity, students will rise to the occasion. Critical engagement requires establishing rigorous standards for all students and providing the scaffolding necessary for them to succeed.

Public shaming or reprimanding Whenever possible, avoid embarrassment and further disruption by resisting the urge to discipline a student in front of the class. Instead, try talking one on one. If another student is the victim of the behavior, make it known publicly that the behavior will be addressed. Consider using restorative justice, which brings the victim into the discussion, allows the other student to make amends and restores the misbehaving student to the classroom community. (Note: Be sure to get support or training or thoroughly research the best practices for executing restorative justice before implementing it for the first time.)

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Teacher Habits That Support Student Development and Success

Reflect on respect. Over 500 teachers in our survey mentioned the word *respect* when asked about their most important classroom rules. Respect offers a strong foundation for classroom agreements because it can apply to the physical environment, instructional time, peer-to-peer and teacher-student interactions. Respect, however, must be explicitly defined and agreed upon. Student definitions of respect often include teachers knowing their names (and pronouncing them correctly), not speaking down to them or embarrassing them in front of their peers, and expressing interest in their perspectives.

Consider the physical layout of the classroom. Step away from your desk and adopt a workspace from which you can easily see students, access materials and circulate to different parts of the classroom throughout the day.

Distinguish the three Ds: disrespect, disruption and disregard for rules. Not all misbehavior is created equal. Differentiate behaviors and respond accordingly.

Foster investment in the classroom culture. Strive for a classroom in which the teacher is a facilitator and leader, not a manager. Collaborative rules and guidelines mean the students have input on what is important and are a part of agreeing to it. Consider holding regular meetings during which the classroom community can hash out problems and find solutions together.

Focus on the future. Who do your students want to be? Where are they going? Call them scholars, scientists, researchers and thinkers. Adopt a college theme. Frame discussions around future successes.

Avoid the quick fix. Calling the school resource officer to remove a student requires less effort than working with a counselor or other support staff to keep the student safely in class. Recognize, however, that choosing the latter option will likely yield a more positive outcome for the student and keep them more connected to the learning environment.

Practice inclusivity. Make sure your students know how important they are and that all of their identities are honored in your classroom. Speak up immediately when you witness bullying or hate speech of any kind.

Give students a variety of ways to respond. Including movement, voice and rhythm is a cornerstone of culturally responsive teaching that improves engagements and lessens discipline issues. Consider using "claps and snaps" or call-and-response to invite engagement and interactivity.

DISTINGUISH THE THREE Ds

"Build a community and be a part of the community, not just the dictator."

"Good discipline is more than just punishing or laying down the law. It is liking children and letting them see that they are liked. It is caring enough about them to provide good, clear rules for their protection."
DR. STANLEY GREENSPAN

PRACTICE INCLUSIVITY

"Our classroom has no place for hate."

GIVE STUDENTS A VARIETY OF WAYS TO RESPOND

"I include movement, music, dance, partner work and other very engaging activities in my class to help meet the physical and psychological needs of my students."

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Focus on development instead of punishment. Become a warm demander. Students have the most respect for teachers they can trust but who also hold them to high standards.

Differentiate. Teaching styles and student personalities vary too much for one-size-fits-all approaches.

Reinforce positive behavior. Rather than praising the students themselves, praise their classroom-ready work and behavior. Be specific ("Good job finding your seat quickly." "Thank you for sharing your crayons.") and abundant. Offer tangible rewards (a prize like a sticker or pencil, or a privilege like extra free time). Rewards can be used for individual or group behavior and may be phased out over time as students' behaviors improve.

Plan classroom transitions. Student engagement and on-task behaviors can be influenced by how smoothly and efficiently teachers move from one learning activity to another. Prepare students with predictable routines and explicitly teach each step—multiple times if necessary. Many students need as much support learning behavioral skills as they do learning academic skills.

Examine your biases. Whether we're aware of it or not, teachers are more likely to invoke negative stereotypes if the misbehaving student is a person of color than if the student is white. LGBT, class and ability biases also affect perceptions of behavior and the ensuing responses.

FOCUS ON DEVELOPMENT INSTEAD OF PUNISHMENT

"Be kind. Imagine every child is your child. How would you hope your child is spoken to, treated and cared for at school?"

DIFFERENTIATE

"Figure out what makes students tick. Get to know them individually and what they dream about. Then, use the things they dream and care about to teach them and motivate them."

REINFORCE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR

"Sometimes we talk to kids and we tell them, 'You act a certain way,' but we don't help them see and learn, 'What does that look like? What does an active listener look like? What do your legs look like when you're learning? What are your arms doing? How is your posture? Where are your eyes?'"

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Six Steps to Stronger Student-Teacher Relationships

1. **Show you care with the first assignment.** An early assignment in any classroom should involve explicitly getting to know each other—collages for writing journals, math graphs of home life, favorite items, ice-breakers, photos, decorating the classroom with personal drawings.

2. **Greet students at the door.** Say "good morning" to each student. Develop a class handshake or greeting. Smile. Set a positive tone for the day.

3. **Interact with students outside the classroom.** Sharing non-academic experiences can help you and your students see each other as whole people. Eat lunch together. Take them on a trip. Watch their sporting or extracurricular events. Attend community events in their neighborhoods.

4. **Listen.** What are your students saying—and what are they *not* saying? From the intricately detailed stories of some students to the quiet silence of others, listening to the message and reading between the lines will tell you a lot about them.

5. **Know your allies and involve them.** Invite families into the classroom and ask for their help, support and suggestions. If your school offers wraparound services or if a similar collaborative team exists, work with them to create and implement plans that will help students to be successful.

6. **Model humility and fallibility.** We are all human and we are all fallible. There are times when we will react to students in ways we wish we hadn't. It's OK to tell your students that you've made a mistake and that you will try to do better. This will help them to know that it's OK for them to make mistakes as well.

KNOW YOUR ALLIES AND INVOLVE THEM

"Contact parents for the good as well as the bad."

MODEL HUMILITY AND FALLIBILITY

"Teachers have a hard time saying when they are wrong to students and not realizing the value of how much [it] would help their relationship building with students to say, 'You know what? I thought about it. I really handled that situation poorly.'"

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Six Ways to Redirect Classroom Disruption

1. Refocus the energy. Instead of pausing your teaching to reprimand, ask the misbehaving student to answer a lesson-related question. This gets the student back on task and keeps the pace of the lesson moving forward without taking the focus off academics

2. Give students a break. Have a disruptive student take a physical break or a break from the current assignment. Ask the student to move seats and or give them a special responsibility or errand.

3. Give non-verbal cues. Eye contact and body language are effective nonverbal communication tools—if handled with sensitivity. A gentle hand on a desk, a silent tally on group points, catching a student's eye and circulating throughout the classroom all have the power to help students refocus and stay on task. Open, non-threatening body language tells students you are calm, in control of the class and mean to be taken seriously, but also that you see them, care about them and want them to do better. Be sensitive to the ways in which different cultures view eye contact and physical proximity between adults and children.

4. Address the disruption quickly and quietly. Get the class focused on another task and pull the student to the side. Start with a question that is not accusatory, like "It looks like you may have a question," or "What's up?" Then remind the student of the rules and assignment, and direct them back to work with an expectation. If a student is engaging in the behavior to seek attention, drawing focus away from the behavior will likely cause it to stop.

5. Offer kinesthetic movement options. Many students (and adults) benefit from some sort of kinesthetic movement while listening to instructions. If a student is squirming or making noise, hand them a stress-ball, a fidget cube, Velcro or other sensory stimulus to reduce their desire to "fidget" and help them stay on task.

6. Give anonymous reminders. "We are just waiting on two scholars to take their seats"

GIVE NON-VERBAL CUES

"Sometimes eye contact or proximity is all a student needs."

OFFER KINESTHETIC MOVEMENT OPTIONS

"I have a basket of 'fidget widgets' that my kids can choose one item from to keep in their hands to keep them busy/occupied as they listen."

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Eight Alternatives to Classroom Removal

1. Schedule a one-on-one conversation. By having a quiet, uninterrupted time for discussion you can not only address the behavior with the student, but also give them the opportunity to talk about their frustrations or other issues that may be affecting their behavior.

SCHEDULE A ONE-ON-ONE CONVERSATION

"Know your students. Pick your battles. Correct students privately, or at least quietly."

2. Call home. Pull the student to the side or meet with them individually. Make time to call the family together and explain the behavior as well as the consequence. Make sure you have a previous relationship with parents and are sensitive to their work schedules when calling.

3. Send a "next-time" message. Frame your response in a manner that corrects student behavior without shame or discouragement. Remind students what to do next time instead of focusing on what they just did. "Next time, come talk to me about the problem you are having with a classmate."

4. Offer time for mindfulness. Teach students how to calm down, breathe and focus their energy. Learning these skills will help students reflective on their behavior and be prepared to re-engage with the classroom and the content. Mindfulness can be done in a safe space like a classroom peace table or as part of a daily routine. Some schools have a special room devoted to mindfulness and use it as an alternative to detention.

5. Offer in-school or community service. Involve the student in making their school a better place. Draw the connection between themselves and the larger school community by having them participate in school improvement, helping the janitorial crew or mentoring a younger student.

6. Remove privileges. Instead of taking away recess, try removing a privilege such as school social time or participation in a class party. Work with parents to create a home-school connection so that the student sees their teacher and their family as a united front when it comes to losing privileges and earning them back.

7. Try restorative justice. If a student's misbehavior targets another student or harms the larger class, create the opportunity for the targeted student(s) to vocalize how the behavior affected them and for the offending student to make amends. (Note: Be sure to get support or training or thoroughly research the best practices for executing restorative justice before implementing it for the first time.)

8. Refer to mental health or support services. Find out who provides mental health services at your school. If these services aren't available, find out what resources the district or the community has to offer. Let families know you are available to help formulate treatment goals related to behaviors you've witnessed at school.

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