

## Using Classroom Design to Reduce Challenging Behaviors in the Elementary Classroom

By Marla J. Lohmann, Kathleen A. Boothe, & Natalie M. Nenovich

### **Abstract**

Elementary school teachers see challenging behaviors every day and may be overwhelmed by the behaviors in their classrooms. To assist with these challenging behaviors, special education teachers are often asked to serve in a consulting role for teachers who are planning classroom behavior management systems for their own classrooms. In this article the authors present Tier 1, classroom-wide strategies. Each of these strategies is effective for addressing classroom behavior challenges and, when used together, the likelihood of success is increased.

**Keywords:** Classroom Management, Behavior, Teaching, Elementary Education

## **Using Classroom Design to Reduce Challenging Behaviors in the Elementary Classroom**

Elementary school teachers see challenging behaviors every day and may be overwhelmed by the behaviors in their classrooms. Based on reports from teachers worldwide, elementary school teachers dedicate about 13% of classroom time to behavior management (OECD, 2014). Other studies have indicated that this number may be as high as 50% of the school day being spent in the management of behavior (Witt, VanDerHeyden, & Gilbertson, 2004). Common behavior challenges observed in the early elementary classroom include (a) inattention and hyperactivity (Nagin & Tremblay, 1999; Tobin & Sugai, 2005), (b) opposition and defiance (Carbonneau et al., 2016; Hart et al., 2016; Nagin & Tremblay, 1999), (c) physical aggression towards other students (Carbonneau et al., 2016; Ostrov & Crick, 2007) (d) verbal aggression towards classmates (Ostrov & Crick, 2007; Tankersley et al., 1996), and (e) relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Ostrov & Keating, 2004). Based on the

severity of these behaviors and the time currently spent addressing behavior challenges, it is clear that effective classroom management practices must be utilized.

For Special Education teachers, one aspect of the job is behavior management for students receiving instruction in the Special Education classroom. Additionally, Special Educators are often asked to serve in a consulting role for General Education teachers who are planning classroom behavior management systems for their own classrooms; in fact, behavior consultation is the most commonly requested consultation service asked of Special Education teachers (Martens & DiGennaro, 2008). Recent research indicates that General Education teachers are more likely to successfully implement behavior interventions with fidelity when consultation is provided by another faculty member within the school instead of an outside consultant (Hagermoser Sanetti, Chafouleas, Fallon, & Jaffrey, 2014), so Special Educators being prepared to serve in this role will have a benefit for the school. Knowing these things, it is imperative that Special Educators have a solid understanding of best practices in behavior management for students in both the General Education and Special Education classrooms.

Based on the research and their own experiences, the authors recommend four evidence-based practices for designing successful Tier 1 Universal behavior supports in the elementary school classroom. The following strategies are based off of the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model. PBIS is a multi-tiered system in which educators are proactive in the management of disruptive behaviors. Tier 1 accounts for both school-wide and classroom-wide strategies for preventing misbehavior, while Tiers 2 and 3 account for those students who need additional behavior support. Tier 1 supports will help approximately 80% of the student population.

For this article, the authors present Tier 1, classroom-wide strategies. These strategies include (a) setting rules and guidelines for the classroom, (b) teaching students how to engage in appropriate behaviors, (c) rewarding students for positive behaviors, and (d) setting up classroom activities to increase the likelihood of success. Each of these strategies is effective for addressing classroom behavior challenges and, when used together, the likelihood of success is increased.

## **Rules and Procedures**

Every classroom needs to have established rules and procedures, but without some guidance, children do not know what is expected of them (Hester, Hendrickson, & Gable, 2009; Stormont, Lewis, Beckner, & Johnson, 2008). The research recommends that teachers create between three and five classroom rules that tell students what is expected of them and are stated in a positive manner (Hester et al., 2009; Myers, Freeman, Simonsen, & Sugai, 2017; Stormont et al., 2008). Students can become part of the process of determining what rules should be part of the classroom. At the beginning of the school year, teachers may hold

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a class meeting and discuss with students what rules they feel will help them to have a successful learning environment. These rules should be posted where students, and adults, will see them on a regular basis; for younger children, it is beneficial to also include visual cues on the rules charts. One author wrote these student-teacher developed rules on a piece of butcher paper, had all the students sign the paper and then it was hung on the wall.

If you are a PBIS school and have particular school-wide rules, you will keep the school-wide rules and teach the specific classroom rules that fall under each category. For example, Table 1 shows the school-wide rules of (a) Be Responsible, (b) Be Respectful, and (c) Be Honest. The authors' example is based on a bee themed classroom. The classroom rules posters include an image of a bee. As you can see in Table 1, the school-wide rules are listed and then the specific classroom expectations of that rule are posted. The authors have delineated rules they have used and/or they have seen used in different areas of the school building. It is important when you create broad rules such as these, that you explain and model what these rules means.

Table 1

### *Examples of Classroom Rules and Procedures & Their Application in a Variety of Settings*

	Bee Responsible	Bee Respectful	Bee Honest
Classroom	Come to class with materials	Keep hands, feet, and objects to self	Always tell the truth
Cafeteria	Throw away your trash and return your lunch tray	Talk in an inside voice	Always tell the truth
Gym	Use the PE equipment only as directed by the teacher	Be a good winner	Always tell the truth
Recess	Stay in the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade playground area	Take turns on the slides and the swings	Always tell the truth

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Music Room	Use the music instruments only for their intended purpose	Listen quietly while the teacher plays the piano	Always tell the truth
Art Class	Put away the supplies and wipe down the table after completing your art project	Share the art supplies with your tablemates	Always tell the truth

## Teaching Appropriate Behaviors

After we have created our classroom rules, we need to teach them to our students. A great way to do this is to teach a lesson in group time and introduce just one rule per day for younger children. When teaching the rules, teachers need to use the same methods that are used for teaching academic skills; (a) model the expectation, (b) check for understanding, (c) have students practice with guidance, and (d) provide immediate and consistent feedback (Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2000; Myers et al., 2017; Stormont et al., 2008). Teachers should review the rules on a regular basis for the first few weeks of school and then review as needed, usually once a week or after major school breaks. The authors also suggest teachers create a classroom meeting time where they may encourage students to come up with a chant with the rules in it. This could be recited each day after morning announcements, as a way to start the day. Classroom rules for younger children should include both words and pictures and should be posted so students can see them throughout the day (Stormont et al., 2008).

Harry and Rosemary Wong's book *First Days of School* is all about teaching these appropriate behaviors through the use of teaching procedures. Teachers should identify those specific procedures, such as (a) lining up for lunch, (b) going to the restroom, (c) coming in to class late, (d) what to do when you are absent, (e) turning in work, and (f) working in centers, etc. It is helpful to students for those procedures to also include a visual and be posted in the appropriate areas within the school environment.

While it might come as a surprise to many teachers, some students don't know what we want them to do. Behavioral expectations at school may differ from the expectations at home and different teachers often have different expectations of students, so each teacher must explicitly teach his/her classroom expectations to all students (Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2000; Fox et al., 2003; Hester et al., 2009; Myers et al., 2017; Stormont et al., 2008). When teachers think of behavior as a skill to learn, just like reading or multiplication, it can change their perspective of the ways to handle behavioral challenges and the ways they approach teaching students their expectations.

## Rewarding Appropriate Behaviors

While it is the natural inclination to punish students for bad behaviors, the authors have noticed that punishment is much less effective than rewarding appropriate behaviors. When children are rewarded for making the right choices, they are often motivated to continue making good choices (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003; Fox & Little, 2001; Fullerton, Conroy, & Correa, 2009; Hester et al., 2009; Stormont, Smith, & Lewis, 2007; Tiano, Fortson, McNeil, & Humphreys, 2005).

In order to ensure that the rewards offered in the classroom are motivating to the particular students, teachers should have students fill out a reward interest survey. The survey should include a variety of rewards that the classroom teacher is willing and able to offer on a regular basis. An example of a reward interest survey created by the authors can be found in Figure 1.

### Mrs. Smith's 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Reward Survey

Please use the green highlighter to show the 5 items you like the best

Please use the blue highlighter to show the items you would like sometimes

Please use your black crayon to cross out the items you would never like

Stickers

Pencils

Erasers

Candy

Lunch with Mrs. Smith

Cleaning the dry erase board

Extra recess

Free reading time

A "happy note" home to your parents

A high-5 from the teacher

A compliment

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Figure 1: Sample Reward Interest Survey

The authors have found that it can sometimes be difficult to brainstorm potential rewards for students. Table 2 identifies rewards the authors have found that work well with elementary students.

Table 2

### *Elementary School Rewards*

Gum	Mechanical pencils
Being the teacher's assistant	Sitting in a rolling chair or special seat
Lunch with the principal	Lunch with a favorite teacher
Fast Food lunch	Books
Stickers	Small toys
Temporary tattoos	Extra recess
No homework	Choosing seat at circle time
Use colored pencils for math page	Extra visit to the library
5 minutes of free time	Play a board game
Be line leader	Teacher plays with you at recess

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Working with a special teacher pen	Choice in activity or assignment
Wearing a hat	Not wearing your shoes in the classroom
Time to go show another teacher in the building their work.	A special job in the building – i.e. reading to a younger student
Opportunity to complete classwork on floor	Dot stickers to “skip” a couple of problems on an activity

### Classroom and Instructional Designs

Classrooms need to be designed in such a way that it is hard for students to fail (Sharma, Singh, & Geromette, 2008; Scott, Park, Swain-Bradway, & Landers, 2007; Stormont et al., 2008). Sometimes, the seating of students or location of items in a classroom can be a trigger for undesirable behaviors. In the authors' experience, teachers should make sure that students who get distracted more easily should be seated away from a loud air conditioner or students who tend to talk should not sit near one another. Many classroom teachers have begun to use flexible seating as a means to allow students to choose areas within the classroom in which they can be a successful learner. The authors have also found that students are more likely to exhibit challenging behaviors when the classroom set-up is “busy” and includes walls that are covered in posters and other materials and has little space for moving around. Make sure you have put thought into where the trash can is and where the turn-in box is, as well as where you have placed any centers, such as computers and the “library”. Teachers may also want to set-up some type of relaxation station or a “think” chair for those students who need a place to “get away” and refocus.

Just like classrooms should be set up in a way to promote success, lessons should also be designed to reduce challenging behaviors (Scott, Alter, & Hirn, 2011). Appropriate and engaging instruction is one of the most effective way to prevent challenging behaviors, so teachers should make sure that lessons are interesting and are neither too easy nor too difficult for our students. Scott et al. (2011) recommend that teachers should design lessons that include frequent opportunities for students to respond and interact with the content and include frequent positive feedback. The authors also suggest incorporating games and technology, offering choices on final products, and allowing students to work in groups as successful ways to engage elementary students. In addition, it is important to break down long instruction segments and allow students to move often as this will enhance student comprehension and learning (Lindt & Miller, 2017).

## Conclusion

Being a teacher is hard and handling challenging behaviors can make it even more difficult. However, with some basic planning and the use of these four evidence-based strategies, behavioral challenges can be reduced and learning time will be increased. The authors recommend that teachers design their Tier 1 interventions that include (a) clear rules and expectations, (b) instruction on behavioral expectations, (c) rewards for appropriate behaviors, and (d) effective classroom and instructional design. By being proactive and following these recommendations teachers can reduce some of the stress associated with disruptive behaviors in their classroom.

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