Making Your Classroom a Safe Space

Setting Expectations

Showing respect for others. Following the “Golden Rule.” Being kind. Understanding differences. These are all familiar notions that most kindergarten and first-grade teachers recognize as essential to maintaining classroom order. These ideas also help children learn important social and emotional skills, establish the classroom as a safe space, and prepare students to become responsible and caring citizens—of their classroom, school, community and the world. Developing and being accountable to such a set of rules or guidelines is in itself a lesson in civics: how to together to create a set of principles that helps govern behavior and fosters a sense of civic responsibility.

You can buy posters proclaiming classroom rules. But children are more likely to follow such rules when they develop them together as members of a shared community. Having children volunteer their ideas, refine them, and prioritize them is a useful exercise in learning the vocabulary of civics—respect, empathy, open-mindedness, honesty, rights, and responsibilities—and in understanding that a community comes with both rights and responsibilities, and that each member’s responsible behavior can make their world, large or small, a better place.

Creating and following community rules and rules of engagement will lay the groundwork so that children can apply these rules to tackle issues as they arise, even when teachers are not leading or guiding them, such as on the playground or at lunch. Understanding that classroom rules apply in those situations helps set the expectation that children will listen to one another, respect differences of opinion, and use their own abilities to solve problems.

The need to make the classroom equitable, emotionally supportive, and nurturing is not new, but it is more crucial than ever before in today’s fast-paced world. Children are faced with bewildering, sometimes traumatic events—both in their personal lives and in the daily news. Many children experience conflicts and problems at home, ranging from illness, divorce, or abuse to hunger and homelessness. Children of all backgrounds may be exposed to disturbing sights and sounds in the ever-present media as well as a general atmosphere of political, social, or cultural discord. The classroom can be a place not just to celebrate the joys of learning, play, and friendships, it can also become a “safe haven” where thoughts, ideas, and feelings can be expressed and processed.
At the start of each school year, children enter a new classroom and get to know one another, and the process of creating class rules begins. With students, brainstorm ways to interact with one another that promote listening, understanding, and compassion. Instead of focusing on the negative (no name-calling, don’t yell, etc.), emphasize the positive (show respect, listen carefully, take turns). Explore the meanings of words such as respect, honesty, apology, and kindness so that students have a shared understanding of what is valued and expected of them. Do your best to be consistent in your expectations and responses to unwanted behaviors and situations. Young students become more comfortable and willing to take risks in environments that have the fewest elements of surprise and instability.

Organize children’s suggestions into categories and come up with a list of four or five phrases that can be posted in the classroom. Some teachers prefer a simple, straightforward list or chart. Others may want a more fanciful version—a flower with petals, an umbrella protecting the class, the five fingers of a helping hand, or an acrostic poem (R-E-S-P-E-C-T or R-U-L-E-S). In addition, many teachers create a version of a “Kindness Tree,”— where children are recognized daily or weekly for being generous and helpful—using sticky notes that “hang” like leaves.

Building Community

• Classroom Jobs
  Assigning rotating classroom “jobs”—a common classroom staple—is another way to instill a sense of community. Teachers can talk about why it’s important for students to do their jobs; how it helps create a safe, just, and fun community of learners; and what happens if students forget. Encourage students to be supportive (with applause, thumbs-up, a smile) when children are chosen for jobs to keep everyone engaged in building the community. As children understand their rights and responsibilities in the kindergarten and first-grade classroom, they will be better able to understand later on the elements of democracy and the need for participation in that democracy.

• Sharing Experiences and Feelings
  Give children plenty of opportunities to talk about their own experiences and feelings as events unfold during the year. Whole-class routines such as circle time, book discussions, and art projects are ideal for sparking conversations. Pair or small-group work is also a good way to encourage an exchange of ideas and perspectives. Sometimes, literally stepping into a representation of someone else’s shoes (e.g., an outline of a footprint or shoe) can help children grasp another point of view. Consider creating a small, comfortable physical space in your classroom where children can go to regulate their feelings or take a breather. This is not a punitive “time-out” space, but rather a place where children can take a moment to be alone with their thoughts.

• Celebrating Differences
  Celebrating differences, languages, and cultures—beyond the usual food or holiday themes—is another way to build your classroom community. Respecting diversity and recognizing what different people have in common are both important concepts that will
help children appreciate one another while creating a sense of belonging. Consider asking families and/or students to translate class songs into their home language. Learn them at the beginning of the year and sing them in various languages throughout the year.

Expressing and processing opinions and feelings about difficult topics—from fairness to sharing to world problems such as racism or natural disasters—will reassure children that the adults around them understand their worries and concerns. Even though it can be challenging for teachers to mediate such discussions, it’s an important way to build and strengthen community while assuring children that those most affected by the issue at hand are validated and cared for. By following the classroom rules even when confronting upsetting issues, children will feel comforted and more relaxed—and can dedicate their energies for learning and growing.