Principle 5

Creates an Effective Learning Environment

The teacher uses an understanding of individual and group motivation and behavior to create a learning environment that encourages positive social interaction, active engagement in learning and self-motivation.

Looks like, Feels like, and Sounds like:

Actively involves students; encourages every student to be a part of the classroom community via jobs and purpose in the classroom; interacts in a warm and positive manner with all students; begins discussions with strengths rather than weaknesses; remains calm/poised/self-confident; moves about in classroom to provide assistance and support; clearly communicates and models expectations for routines, rituals, and academic and social goals

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized."

Dr. Haim Ginott

Use this checklist from the "I Can Do It" Program to rate your classroom disciplinary practices.

Analyze your classroom disciplinary practices with this checklist from the National Education Association's "I Can Do It" Classroom Management training module, a program developed by the California Teachers Association. Begin by placing a check in the appropriate column after each item. Then add your points -- allowing 4 points for each "Usually," 2 points for each "Sometimes," and 0 points for each "Never."

Rate yourself as follows: 90-100 = Excellent; 80-89 = Good; 70-79 = Fair; Below 70 = Poor

Behavior	Usually	Sometimes	Never
1. I get students' attention before giving instructions.	☐	☐	☐
2. I wait for students to attend rather than talk over chatter.	☐	☐	☐
3. I quickly get students on-task.	☐	☐	☐
4. I give clear and specific instructions.	☐	☐	☐
5. I set explicit time limits for task completion.	☐	☐	☐
6. I circulate among students at work.	☐	☐	☐
7. I hold private conferences/conversations during class.	☐	☐	☐
8. I model courtesy and politeness.	☐	☐	☐
9. I use a quiet voice in the classroom.	☐	☐	☐
10. I use a variety of cues to remind students of expected behavior.	☐	☐	☐
11. I teach students my cues.	☐	☐	☐
12. I enrich my classroom to improve students' motivation.	☐	☐	☐
13. I impoverish my classroom to improve attention.	☐	☐	☐
14. I am aware of the effects of my dress, voice, and movements on student behavior.	☐	☐	☐
15. I use students' names as low-profile correctors of inattention.	☐	☐	☐
16. I use proximity to improve classroom control.	☐	☐	☐
17. I communicate positive expectations of good behavior to my class.	☐	☐	☐
18. I have clear and specific rules that I teach my students.	☐	☐	☐
19. I refuse to threaten or plead with students.	☐	☐	☐
20. I consistently follow through with consequences to enforce rules.	☐	☐	☐
21. I use "I messages" assertively to tell students what I want them to do.	☐	☐	☐
22. I use "I messages" humanistically to communicate my feelings.	☐	☐	☐
23. I respond to behavior I like with specific, personal praise.	☐	☐	☐
24. I use non-verbal, social, and activity reinforces.	☐	☐	☐

Building Community in the Classroom

by Ellen Booth Church

The beginning of the year is a time for creating a sense of community, and your room is the gathering place. Here, all children can feel secure, nurtured and supported by the environment, each other, and YOU. This new group of individuals bring with them divergent interests, abilities, cultures, and families. Each child arrives at your door with a fertile background of experience that enriches your program. By demonstrating your loving acceptance of all children's backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints, you create an environment that says, "All are welcome here." At the same time you are modeling just how you want children to be with one another. The goal is to celebrate individuals while creating a sense of community.

We know from recent studies that children who feel a sense of identity within a group are the most well-adjusted and successful in school. As children progress developmentally, their group interaction skills become more finely tuned as well. Children's "world view" expands to add a greater understanding of the relationship between self and other. Studies also tell us that some of the most important skills children need for school readiness and success are the "people skills" of social interaction, communication, collaboration, and problem solving. They are the fertile ground that supports the academics of learning ABCs and 123s! That is what you are doing in the first month of school — creating an emotionally secure "home base" for children to learn in. So don't worry if you are not teaching many specific academic skills in your first month. By focusing on establishing a safe, secure, and nurturing environment, you are teaching children how to learn and are setting the stage for the entire year.

How can you help a child feel secure in a new community? Let's look at a few elements that allow children to feel known and supported.

Building Community Through Identity

Your children need to see themselves reflected in the classroom. Invite families to send in photos of their children and family before school starts or in the first few weeks. Finding themselves "already there" will go a long way towards making children feel comfortable. Not only will children enjoy finding their photos around the room, but they will delight in learning about their new friends and their families. Children may want to make family books in the first few weeks of school as a way of getting to know each other.

Building Community Through Familiarity

Moving into a new class of children can be very challenging. Children need to find things that are familiar to them in the classroom. It can be something simple, such as puzzles and games they might have played with in a previous classroom. These might be materials that seem too "easy" for them, but in order to build a community, children need to build a sense of comfort - the time to be challenged comes later. And interestingly, children who have a sense of success with a particular educational material or game are more likely to share it with others and thus build community. Don't forget to use familiar and favorite songs and books at group time. Children will feel so proud when they can say, "I know that book!"

Building Community Through Warmth and Beauty

Studies have shown that warm colors and soft spaces are welcoming to children and create a secure and nurturing "nest" from which they can grow. Lots of pillows, soft toys, fresh flowers, soft clay or dough, and items for water play, create a homelike environment. These elements also foster a sense of community. A soft place to share a book with a friend, a small clay table for two, or a beautiful bouquet of flowers to examine together all can create "warm spots" for children to share with a new friend. But perhaps the warmest element of your classroom is you and your SMILE.

Building Community Through Trust

At this stage of development, in order to feel part of their classroom community, children need to feel the same sense of trust in school as they do at home. Your calm acceptance of children's feelings during the transition from home to school goes a long way towards letting children know that it is safe to express their feelings and building their sense of trust in you. Reassure children by making eye contact, listening to what they need to say, and acknowledging their thoughts and feelings. Don't expect children to make friends right away. Children may need to engage in parallel play before they are ready to share and communicate with another child.

Building Community Through Predictability

Predictability is another important part of building an environment of trust and safety. Establishing predictable routines helps children know what to expect and helps them feel confident and capable in the group. Keep a regular schedule of activities throughout the day. If possible, take photographs of each section of the day and place them in a row at child eye level in a left to right sequence from the beginning of the day to the end. If children are wondering "what comes next" or "when do I go home," they can look at the sequence to see how many more activities are left for the day.

Building Community Through Family Involvement

Each child who walks through your door "comes" with a family. The family is a key ingredient to children feeling at home in your classroom. In some programs, you may only meet the families at special meetings or occasions. In others, you will have the pleasure of seeing them every day when they drop off and pick up their children. Make a point of connecting in a variety of ways, from phone calls to letters or notes sent home. If possible, learn their email addresses for instant family communication. They will appreciate your efforts and may reward you with active participation in your program. Invite family members to visit and share their culture, work, and interests. You will be expanding your classroom community to include the greater community of the town where your school resides.

Ultimately, the essential element to creating a sense of community in your classroom is YOU! It is not the number of toys and materials or the size of your space that really counts. It is your loving, compassionate attitude towards the children in your classroom family that creates a joyful community.
For more beginning of the school year activities, see Ellen Booth Church's book, *Best-Ever Circle Time Activities: Back to School* (Scholastic, Inc., 2003).

To Build a Caring, Responsive Classroom Community

(*Based on the work of Dr. Becky Bailey*)

The brain is a pattern seeker, and behavior has memory. So……establish rituals and routines in your classroom.

- Notice each student by name each day/class period

- Connect with a handshake, high five, or other greeting
  (*Connections on the outside build connections on the inside*)

- Start class with a community activity, such as:
  - Dim lights and read an inspirational story or quote;
  - Begin the brain smart way with a song and movement to stimulate the brain and heart for optimum learning
  - Have a moment to allow students to express concerns and worries so that the class can, in turn, wish each other well with positive thought

- Make sure that students have jobs in the classroom to have a place and a purpose

- Make sure that the goal of the day is clear and attainable

- Use common tools that all students can recognize and use to engage in subject matter

- Build time for peer and group interaction with shared expectations for respectful dialogue

- Build time to move around during the class
  The best exercise for the brain is EXERCISE!

- Celebrate that you have fulfilled the goal for the class
- Conclude the class with a positive reflection of the day

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Assuming the Best

Rick Smith and Mary Lambert

Students want to learn both content and appropriate behavior. And they can only do it in a safe, structured classroom.

When Paul Kilkenny, a mentor teacher in East San Jose, California, works with teachers, he occasionally finds himself in the role of cheerleader. He notes,

My teachers work with kids who are often in tough situations, and the kids can bring that same toughness into the classroom. When the teachers find themselves focusing extensively on student misbehavior, sometimes my job is simply to remind them to continually assume the best about their students.

Assuming the best is essential for long-term learning and positive connections to take place in our classrooms. When it comes to classroom-management, there are no exotic new consequences that teachers can use to get students on task. The most effective classroom management comes in the form of strategies that prevent acting out before it occurs. And those strategies arise primarily from assuming that our students want to be here, want to participate, and, specifically, want to learn good behavior. When we internalize and act from this assumption, our students behave better and learn more.

The Invisible Contract

Whenever students walk into the classroom, assume they hold an invisible contract in their hands, which states, "Please teach me appropriate behavior in a safe and structured environment." The teacher also has a contract, which states, "I will do my best to teach you appropriate behavior in a safe and structured environment."

This approach can radically change our perspective on student misbehavior. To illustrate, in the beginning of the school year, Mark decides to test his teacher, whom we will call Mrs. Allgood. Mark looks at his invisible contract and thinks, "This contract is important. Let's see whether Mrs. Allgood is going to uphold her end of it." So Mark breaks a small rule to see what will happen. If Mrs. Allgood is harsh or punitive to Mark for breaking the rule, he says to himself, "This class isn't *safe*; she isn't honoring the contract." However, if Mrs. Allgood ignores Mark and he gets away with breaking the rule or if she enforces it inconsistently, Mark says to himself, "This class isn't *structured*; she isn't honoring the contract."

Either way, Mark is not satisfied. So he thinks to himself, "To communicate the importance of this contract and give the teacher another chance, I'll break a slightly larger rule." He will continue to break larger and larger rules until Mrs. Allgood comes through consistently with both safety and structure. When she's consistent over time, Mark says to himself, "Oh good, she's honoring the contract. Now I can relax and focus on learning."

The bottom line is that when students test us, they want us to pass the test. They are on our side rooting for us to come through with safety and structure. When students act out, they are really saying, "We don't have the impulse control that you have. We are acting out so that you will provide us with safety and structure—be soft yet firm—so that we can learn the behavior we need to learn to be happy and successful."

However, few students approach their teachers and directly ask to be taught behavior in a safe and structured environment. What, then, is the justification for this assumption?

Our Internal Radios

Imagine that students have radio tuners in their heads and are continually tuning in to a myriad of radio stations that deal with what it means to be a youth. These stations differ for students of different ages and cultural settings, but they all focus on fitting in, being cool, achieving short-term gratification, and enjoying consequence-free behavior. Often, many of our students will narrate these radio noises out loud, as though these signals express the truth of who the students are. They will entertain such ideas as "I don't care about

learning," "My friends' opinions of me matter more than my own or my teachers' opinions," "Fitting in and looking good matter more than being good," or "Why bother to try?"

Now imagine that students have radio beacons in their hearts. These beacons pour out the same basic message over and over again: We want to learn and participate. We want to be positive. Please teach us appropriate behavior as well as content. Please know that we often want to narrate the noises in our heads, but we need you to honor our hearts at the same time. Please be compassionate, allowing us our wants as you honor our needs.

When we internalize the assumption that students want to learn and participate, we begin to see that beneath their complaints about the lesson, homework, or seating chart, students are saying one thing: "Please care for us today." As we honor this message, without belittling or marginalizing the noises that students narrate, we can get our message through the noise of their heads into the receptive place in their hearts. Our communication becomes clear and kind, and our enthusiasm becomes contagious.

We teachers have the same radio tuners and beacons as our students do. Regardless of what our experience is when we come to school—whether we are feeling ready, regretting lack of sleep, or mulling over tensions at home—we can reach through our own mental noise and our students' noise and touch them heart to heart.

This will affect all our communications with students, especially those that address inappropriate behavior. This softening of our communication enables us to be firm when necessary, but in a way that invites cooperation rather than arguments and protests. Our students' behavior will begin to reflect these positive assumptions. What shifts is the *how*—the manner in which we communicate. Our students begin to feel that we are on their side, even as we address the *what*—their behavior. By holding our ground with our own radio noises ("These kids don't care." "They're just lazy." "Why bother?"), we can hold our ground with student misbehavior in a way that is both firm and soft, corrective and inviting. In addition, as we exercise this "muscle of positivity," we avoid the burnout so often associated with teaching tough kids. We create a self-fulfilling prophecy of appropriate and engaging student participation.

Positive Strategies, Positive Results

The strategies that follow can improve our interactions with students, create classrooms that honor students' need for safety and structure, and promote student learning.

Strategy 1: Use Volume, Tone, and Posture

When we assume that students want to learn behavior, we can readily see that we are here to *teach* behavior. This changes our interactions with students. For example, Mrs. Allgood is teaching a lesson; in the back of the classroom, Mark is disturbing his neighbors by showing them his new *Sports Illustrated*. He needs to stop. If Mrs. Allgood assumes that she's only here to teach content—to stay on task—she will go so quickly through the discipline piece that Mark will probably not understand, and so he will continue to act out. Some teachers jokingly refer to this as "drive-thru discipline."

On the other hand, if Mrs. Allgood assumes that she is here to teach behavior, she will pause in her lesson and address Mark's behavior. Her first option is to walk up to him and quietly state her request: "Please put that away and have a seat." If that's not possible because of time or furniture constraints, she will shift from "content mode" to "behavior mode," facing Mark squarely as she softens her voice and lowers her tone. Knowing that Mark is committed to both learning appropriate behavior and wanting to look good in front of his friends, she won't publicly humiliate him. Her shift in volume, tone, and posture will firmly but softly communicate what she expects of him, deescalating possible tension.

By taking these extra moments to address Mark's behavior, Mrs. Allgood will have more time to focus on teaching content because Mark will most likely get it the first time around. And if he says something under his breath, she knows that she can let him have the last word. It's his way of saving face as he refocuses on learning content.

Strategy 2: Implement the Two-by-Ten Strategy

Raymond Wlodkowski[1] did extensive observations of student behavior, cataloguing student time in and out of seat as well as the types, instances, and severity of student disruptions. In particular, he researched a strategy called "Two-by-Ten." Here, teachers focus on their most difficult student. For two minutes each day, 10 days in a row, teachers have a personal conversation with the student about anything the student is interested in, as long as the conversation is G-rated. Wlodkowski found an 85-percent improvement in that one student's behavior. In addition, he found that the behavior of all the other students in the class improved.

Martha Allen, an adjunct professor at Dominican University's Teacher Credential Program in San Rafael, California, asked her student teachers to use the Two-by-Ten Strategy with their toughest student. The results? Almost everyone reported a marked improvement in the behavior and attitude of their one targeted student, and often of the whole class. Many teachers using the Two-by-Ten Strategy for

the first time have had a similar corroborating experience: Their worst student became an ally in the class when they forged a strong personal connection with that student.

This can be counterintuitive. But the students who seemingly deserve the most punitive consequences we can muster are actually the ones who most need a positive personal connection with their teacher. When they act out, they are letting us know that they are seeking a positive connection with an adult authority figure and that they need that connection first, before they can focus on learning content.

The teachers whom Paul Kilkenny mentors in East San Jose regularly use the Two-by-Ten Strategy with their challenging students. "Not only does it help with the toughest students," says Paul, "but also it helps the teachers remember their humanity as they attempt to survive and thrive in the classroom."

Strategy 3: Break Things into Steps

Just as students often need complex math problems broken down into small, digestible lessons, so they need small, manageable steps when it comes to learning behavior and classroom procedures.

For example, if Mark has a hard time putting his art supplies away on time, instead of punishing him Mrs. Allgood can meet with him, and together they can practice putting the supplies away. Instead of one step—"Put your things away"—the teacher can guide the student through several steps: "Pick up the scissors and place it in the scissors tray; return the colored paper to the stack in the back of the room; put your project in your folder." By practicing each of the steps, Mark has a better sense of what to do and is more likely to succeed when Mrs. Allgood announces clean-up time to the class.

Instead of throwing up our hands and saying, "These kids don't care" or "These kids can't succeed," we should assume they are committed to success in both content and behavior. We can then put our energy into breaking down the behaviors we want to see into simple steps so that students clearly understand what we expect of them.

Strategy 4: Use Behavior Rubrics

Rubrics work great for content—and equally great for procedures and behavior. For example, if a particular student is inappropriately loud, Mrs. Allgood can provide the student with a 1–5 *volume rubric*. A 1 would indicate a whisper, a 3 would indicate a normal conversational tone, and a 5 would indicate a yell. The student can practice all five numbers, and the teacher can then assign different numbers to different school and social situations: A 1 would be appropriate if the student asked a classmate to borrow a pencil while the rest of the class was engrossed in a writing task; a 3 would be appropriate for students conversing during group work; a 5 would be appropriate on the playground. Rubrics work well for many classroom behaviors, such as lining up, settling down to learn, and getting ready for dismissal.

Strategy 5: Use Visuals

Visuals also serve as great road maps for student success. If, for example, students have difficulty getting their textbooks and homework on their desks when the bell rings at the beginning of class, Mrs. Allgood can use visuals like the ones on pages 18–19 to clarify exactly what she expects. She can use a diagram, drawing, or photograph of the surface of the desk, with the textbook open to the proper page and the homework on the upper left-hand corner of the desk. At the start of class, using PowerPoint or an overhead, she can flash the picture on the board or screen in front of the room, giving the students "17 seconds to be ready to start." Visuals work well for such activities as setting up labs, putting supplies away, and clarifying the school dress code.

More Than a Smile

For many teachers, being positive means putting on a smile, pretending to like a particular student, or going through the motions of using strategies purportedly designed to enhance the classroom environment. In contradistinction, by assuming the best about our students—particularly in situations in which that assumption seems most implausible—we exercise a muscle that is real and lasting. Assuming the best is an underlying orientation that enables us to treat both our students and ourselves with respect and dignity. It helps us understand that when students act out, they are sending us a message that they want a positive connection. Then we can start to see "discipline moments" as opportunities for teaching an essential piece that students want to learn.

Note: For examples of visual rubrics teachers can use, view this presentation.

Endnote

[1] Wlodkowski, R. J. (1983). *Motivational opportunities for successful teaching* [Leader's Guide]. Phoenix, AZ: Universal Dimensions.

Rick Smith is the author of *Conscious Classroom Management: Unlocking the Secrets of Great Teaching* (Conscious Teaching Publications, 2004) and founder of Conscious Teaching, 21 Crest Road, Fairfax, CA 94930; 415-456-9190; www.consciousteaching.com; ricksmith2001@yahoo.com. **Mary Lambert** is a Conflict Resolution and Communications Facilitator in San Rafael, California; lambert242@aol.com.