

Chapter Twelve

Teaching Routines

Rules, Rules, Rules

"You and your stupid rules! I can't do anything!"

Rules have never been terribly popular, particularly among young people. It is not too surprising that young teachers, new to the "parent role," approach making rules for their classrooms with some ambivalence.

"I remember all of the rules my teachers used to have. I thought most of them were dumb. Don't do this, and don't do that."

In fact, rules are typically stated in terms of "Don't do this, and Don't do that." I had

to chuckle recently when I read the rules posted at the entrance to a state park:

- No fires
- No liquor
- No glass containers
- No littering
- No dumping
- No dogs
- No camping overnight

On the bottom of the sign someone had scratched, "No breathing."

This tradition of stating rules in terms of "Don't do this," and "Don't do that" is nowhere more evident than in our school

Preview

- Classroom routines train the students to carry out procedures with a minimum of wasted time.
- Each routine must be taught with the care of any other lesson. This is time-consuming at the beginning, but it pays large dividends for the remainder of the semester.
- By doing chores, students learn to take pride in helping out around the classroom. The rule of chores is, "Never do anything for students that they are thoroughly capable of doing for themselves."
- Structuring communication with parents is crucial. They will either be your allies or your adversaries depending on the nature of your first contact with them.
- Sending work home on a regular basis with provision for feedback helps involve parents in proactive problem solving.

discipline codes. A high school principal friend of mine once told me,

"Our School Discipline Code explicitly prohibits every outrageous thing that any kid has ever done in the history of the school. It takes up four pages of the student handbook. It serves as the legacy of the student body."

I was consulting at a juvenile corrections facility in a small town in Michigan, and the administrators and I were trading stories after the workshop. They too had a student handbook that contained an endless list of the things that students should never do. One administrator said,

"I got a call last year from some guy at the local airport. One of our kids was over there running around on the runway, and nobody could catch him. So I drove over there. The kid finally ran out of wind and gave up. By that time there were four or five Cessnas anxiously circling overhead. I asked the kid, 'What were you thinking?' He said, 'Hey, Mr. Donaldson, you didn't say we couldn't do it.'"

There must be a better way to approach classroom rules than making a list of do's and don'ts. These lists have never had a major effect on behavior anyway.

Types of Rules

When we speak of "rules," we are addressing a broad topic that is far more complex than "do's and don'ts." Different kinds of rules serve different functions. In the classroom, there are two basic types of rules.

- **General Rules:** General rules spell out the teacher's overall expectations for good work and good behavior within the classroom.
- **Specific Procedures:** Specific procedures spell out exactly "how to do this" and exactly "how to do that" in the classroom.

General Rules

General rules deal with broad classes of behavior and are best stated in positive rather than negative language. Typical examples are, "Treat each other with respect." and, "Pay attention when the teacher is speaking."

It is time well spent for a faculty to devise a list of general rules that all teachers can share. The discussion that accompanies this process can produce some important consensus building.

The following guidelines for general rules will be helpful during this discussion.

- There should be relatively few general rules (five to eight is most common).
- Only make rules that you are willing to enforce at any time. (Failing to enforce your rules defines them as hot air.)
- General rules should be simple and clear.
- They should be posted.

These general rules might best be understood as part *behavioral guideline* and part *values clarification*. A discussion of each general rule at the beginning of the semester gives the teacher a chance to convey his or her goals and expectations to the class.

Specific Procedures

As mentioned previously, procedures describe exactly *how to do this* and *how to do that*. As such, they are the nuts and bolts of Classroom Structure.

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The only way to make the implementation of procedures *affordable* is to make them a matter of *routine*. Procedures must be taught as thoroughly as any other lesson – complete with Say, See, Do Cycles, Structured Practice, constant monitoring, and repetition to mastery.

A routine is automatic when it can be carried out quickly and correctly in response to a simple verbal prompt.

A School Site Procedures Manual

One of the most cost-effective forms of faculty collaboration is the development of a School Site Procedures Manual. This manual shares the wisdom and experience of teachers in the form of protocols for each routine that faculty members regularly employ.

Writing the manual stimulates sharing among teachers. This helps solidify commitment to key routines as it hones the most efficient way of implementing each one. Uniform procedures pay additional dividends whenever students transition from teacher to teacher or from one grade level to another.

Teaching Procedures and Routines

Making the Investment

The teaching of classroom procedures is time-consuming. *First*, each routine must be taught thoroughly. And *second*, there are many of them to teach.

Yet, in spite of this initial investment, classroom routines are one of the teacher's *primary labor saving devices*. They reduce effort and stress each time the teacher has the class

do something as a group. Over the long run the investment in training pays for itself many times over.

Research has repeatedly shown that teachers with the best run classrooms spend most of the first two weeks of the semester teaching their procedures and routines. Teachers who do not make this investment deal with the same behavior problems over and over all semester long. It is a case of:

Pay me now, or pay me later.

Do it right, or do it all year long.

As logical as this might sound, few teachers actually make the investment. In fact, the older the students, the less investment we make.

The teachers who make the greatest investment are, of course, the primary teachers. They spend half of their time teaching procedures and routines.

The investment is still considerable in the middle grades. But by junior high and high school, the teaching of procedures has typically become perfunctory – just some announcements on the first day of class.

They Should Know By Now

When secondary teachers are asked why they don't spend more time on the teaching of procedures, they say, "They should know how to behave by now." When pressed, these teachers say such things as:

"Spend the first two weeks on rules – you have to be kidding! I don't have two weeks for that. I would never make up the time."

or

"I can see doing it with the little kids. But doing it with older kids seems like a complete waste of time. How often do they have to be taught these same routines?"

Pay me now,
or pay me later.
Do it right,
or do it
all year long.

Consequently, the teaching of classroom procedures and routines is one of the most neglected areas of classroom management. This lack of proactive management will cost teachers dearly as the semester progresses.

Whatever The Students Can Get Away With

While these teachers' concern with "losing valuable instructional time" is sincere, it is also naive. The students know exactly how to behave in class. They always have. The question is, *do they have to?*

You should know from your own experience that students don't act the same in every classroom. They adjust their behavior to match the standards of each teacher. If their second period teacher lets them talk and fool around while their third period teacher does not, they will act up in second period and cool it in third period.

The standards in any classroom, to put it bluntly, are defined by *whatever the students can get away with*. If teachers do not take the time to carefully teach their rules, routines, and standards, they will get whatever the students feel like giving them.

This is a classic example of *proactive* versus *reactive* management. A wise teacher knows that spending time on procedures early in the semester saves time in the long run. Prevention is always cheaper than remediation.

A Sample Procedure

Let's take a typical procedure as our laboratory for examining the teaching of a classroom routine. By the

time you have taught your first routine of the year, the students will know you a lot better.

Imagine that you are a fourth grade teacher, and it is the first day of school. Today, you will take the class to the library to meet the librarian. But, before the class can get to the library, they must pass through the hall. So, today you will give the lesson on *passing through the halls quietly*.

First we set the stage by talking about how noise in the halls prevents students in other rooms from learning. You know the tune.

Next, before you go out into the hall, you must develop visual cues so you can pantomime instructions to the students once you leave the room. A finger to the lips or a zippering of the mouth is standard fare. You will also need "stop" and "start" signals. But one signal you *must* have is the signal to *stop, go back, and start all over*. You probably remember it. The teacher turns solemnly, holds both palms toward the students, and then, with a circular motion, points both index fingers back toward the classroom.

Next, you will have to line the students up. Assign places in line for the same reason that you assign seating.

Place the students who disrupt right under your nose, and place the orderly students at the back of the line. Separate best friends to reduce talking. Students should be able to name the person in front of them and behind them. A double line rather than a single line keeps the group more compact.

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Before going out into the hall, you will need to rehearse each of your signals one last time to be sure that you can direct the students with nonverbal cues. Only then are they ready, with a final zippering of the lips, to go out the door.



... until we get it right.

Out in the hall, with due seriousness, you check the lines for straightness before giving the signal to "follow me." The little band heads down the hall.

Now, let's interject a note of reality. What, do you think, are the odds that this collection of fourth-graders will make it all the way to the library in complete silence? If your guess is "zero," you show real promise as a teacher.

Halfway down the hall you hear a giggle from somewhere in the group. Do you care who giggled? *No*. Do you care how loud it was? *No*. Do you care whether students in nearby classrooms were actually pulled off task? *No*.

You turn, hold palms toward the class, make the circular motion with your hands, and point back toward the classroom. Brace yourself for a pained look on those little faces. Some show disbelief for a moment before they realize that you are not kidding. Keeping a straight face is the hardest part of this routine.

The class shuffles back to where they began, and you repeat your signals; straight lines, zippered lips, follow me. Off we go again.

This time the class makes it two-thirds of the way to the library when you hear some talking at the back of the line. Do you care who talked? *No*. Do you care how loud it was? *No*.

You turn, hold palms toward the class and give your now well-known "about face" signal. This time you see serious pain on the faces of students.

Several students mouth the words, "I didn't do it," with pleading hands and looks of exaggerated sincerity. Keep a straight face.

Back to the beginning. Line straight, lips zipped, follow me. Off they trundle one more time.

Words Have the Meaning You Give Them

For those teachers to whom this level of investment seems strange, it is worth emphasizing at this point that *not one word* in the English language has any fixed meaning in your classroom on the first day of school. Words will only have the meaning that you give them.

Take, for example, a simple three-letter word: “now.” What does “now” mean? Well, in some families “now” means “Now.” In other families “now” means, “Just a second!” In other families it means, “Okay, in a minute!” In other families it means, “Okay, as soon as I’m done with this!” In other families it means, “Okay, as soon as this show is over!” And, in some families it means, “In your dreams!”

Each family is a subculture. The kids in your classroom come from all kinds of family subcultures. As you can see from the above example, words mean very different things to different people.

Kids will bring all of these different meanings into your classroom on the first day of school. As a result, a word as simple as “now” means nothing until you teach your students what *you* mean by it. The same could be said of the word “quiet” or the word “walk.” None of these things have any fixed meaning until you teach the class exactly what they mean *in your presence*.

Incidentally, don’t expect these meanings that you establish at such effort to magically transfer from one setting to another. The students can easily discriminate what

will be tolerated in one teacher’s classroom as opposed to another. That is why students can change their behavior so readily when they change classes or have a substitute.

Simplifying Rules and Routines

One way of simplifying rules and routines is to group them into clusters. One primary teacher, for example, had a cardboard stoplight prominently displayed in the front of the classroom where she could place an arrow pointing to the red, yellow, or green lights.

The *red* light condition meant “walk quietly and work quietly.” The *yellow* light condition meant that only one person could leave his or her seat at a time, and only one person could talk at a time. The *green* light condition signaled that the class could move about and talk freely.

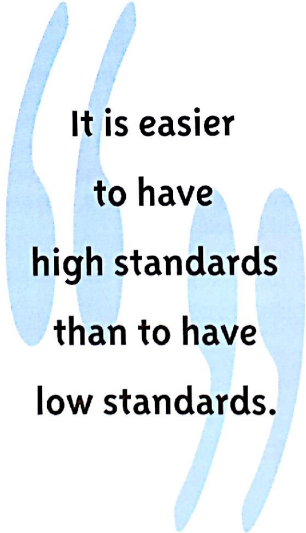
The stoplight served as a form of shorthand for conveying an entire set of rules and expectations. As usual, the investment in training early in the semester was repaid many times over through sheer efficiency of communication.

Classroom Chores

Certain classroom routines engage the students in helping you out around the classroom. These routines are traditionally referred to as “chores.”

Frazzled Parents, Lazy Children

Where do children learn that it is important to help out? It certainly does not come from being waited on hand and foot.



**It is easier
to have
high standards
than to have
low standards.**

Some parents do all of the work around the house. They clean, straighten up, prepare meals, do the dishes, and pick up after the kids all day long. Their only reward is to become exhausted from serving a house full of lazy ingrates.

Owning a servant, be they parent or teacher, does not seem to transmit a sense of selfless giving to children. Quite the contrary, it trains them to expect much and give little.

How often have you heard a parent say, "You know, it is just easier to do it myself." In fact, doing the job yourself rather than supervising a child's doing it *is* easier – especially when the child tries to avoid the work by whining and heel-dragging. It's easier, that is, in the *short run*.

But, what is easy in the short run becomes exhausting in the *long run*. Picking up after a child right now might seem easy, but picking up after them *forever* will not be so easy.

The Value of Being Needed

Effective parents train their children to help and to take pride in helping. Effective teachers do the same.

You could use some help, of course. But, more importantly, the children *need* to help.

Children who are neither asked nor expected to contribute to the well-being of the group are, by definition, not needed. They are excess baggage.

Being peripheral members of the group tends to bring out the worst in children. It feeds into laziness and depen-

dency while denying them a way of demonstrating their worth.

Whether at home or at school, children need jobs that contribute to the well-being of the group. They need to feel proud because they have pulled their own weight. They need "chores."

The Rule of Chores

In the classroom dozens of routine jobs need to be done on a daily basis. Only when these jobs are done will the teacher have time to respond to students' special needs.

Effective teachers delegate. The size and complexity of the teacher's job require that they train the students to carry some of the burden.

Since chores are good for both the teacher and the students, I would suggest the following "rule of chores:"

Never do anything for students that they are thoroughly capable of doing for themselves.

Organizing Classroom Chores

I have known teachers, particularly in the upper elementary grades, who had a job for each student in the class. These teachers rarely had to lift a finger to do anything but teach. They had a gift for organization.

If they were teaching a small group and suddenly felt the need for their grade book, they would say to their "grade book monitor,"

"Tyler, may I please have my grade book?"

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of doing
for themselves.**

Tyler would quickly deliver the grade book and return to his seat. What a deal!

Frankly, I doubt my own ability to keep thirty classroom chores straight. A simple way of reducing the complexity of chores is to group them into four clusters and assign a team of students to each cluster of chores. Rotate the chores every week so that each student does every chore during a four-week rotation.

Of course, the chores will be different in World History than in wood shop. The clusters listed on this page are typical of a self-contained classroom and serve only as food for thought.

Cleanup

- Clean up paper and litter in the classroom.
- Arrange books and materials on the shelves.
- Clean up work areas and take care of equipment.
- Clean the chalkboard and erasers.
- Clean up a portion of the yard. If all classrooms are involved, the yard can be kept in good shape.

Bulletin board and decoration

- Make bulletin boards. Why do teachers spend so much time making bulletin boards themselves when, with a little structure, the students can have fun doing it and learn in the process?
- Decorate the classroom. Holidays, special events, and new social studies units provide a perennial source of inspiration.
- Plan art projects for the class.

Enrichment

- Plan enrichment activities and learning games.
- Help construct learning centers.

- Provide suggestions for preferred TV viewing each week.
- Present current events on a daily or weekly basis.

Clerical work

- Collect and pass out papers.
- Correct papers and record grades under the teacher's supervision (insofar as you are comfortable with this). Students often take care of recording Bell Work.
- Help with attendance and collecting lunch orders, milk money, paperback book orders, and so on.

The main investment in building routines is simply the practice required for mastery. For example, the first time the students are on the cleanup committee, you will have to teach them how you want your boards erased. And, the first time your enrichment committee presents current events, you will need to rehearse them. As always, the investment in Classroom Structure is greatest at the beginning, but it yields dividends for the entire semester.

Helping with Instruction

While most chores have to do with mundane matters, make your students responsible for as much as they can handle. They can help you teach by developing visual aids for lessons and writing lists of test questions. Student learning groups can carry out skill practice, test review, and the editing of written work.

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remainder of the
year.

Peer tutoring can be considered part of the group's self-management. You model Praise, Prompt, and Leave as well as Say, See, Do Teaching every day. Teach the class these key instructional skills so they can help each other more effectively. It will make them better tutors.

Communicating Your Standards to Parents

No Second Chance

You will have dealings with the parents of your students sooner or later. The helpful parents will often contact you as soon as the school year begins to volunteer as aides or chaperones. But the parents of the troublemakers tend to avoid contact with the school.

If, however, your first meeting with these parents is about a problem, you have just made an adversary for the remainder of the year. They do not want to own the problem, and they will often blame it on you or any other convenient target if given the chance. These are the parents you least want to have as adversaries.

It will be to your advantage to be proactive rather than reactive in getting to know the parents of your students—particularly the parents of the problem students. You will need a plan for structuring your first contact.

A Self-Contained Classroom

I have known elementary teachers who sent out invitations to a barbeque or picnic at their homes as soon as they received the class list in August. Most of their colleagues expressed admiration while declining to do the same. Yet, these teachers had a level of help and cooperation from parents that was on a different scale from that of their colleagues.

Many teachers at the elementary level send out a letter before the school year starts welcoming the parents and

their children, listing books to read over the summer, and giving a brief preview of the curriculum for the coming semester. This type of communication can also take place during the first week of school, accompanied by a copy of the classroom rules and a brief "mission statement" to set the tone.

As a follow-up to this contact, it is extremely important to be proactive in structuring your first personal conversation with the parents of your students. Do it early before problems force you into a negative first contact. Beginning in the second week of school, call the parents of each student. This is a brief conversation of roughly five minutes duration. Call five parents a night.

The structure of the conversation is as follows:

- **Introduce yourself.**
- **Briefly describe the highlights of your curriculum:** When I say brief, I mean *brief*. Just give a flavor of the coming year, as in:

"This is the year the students learn about the age of steam and the industrial revolution, so you will be hearing a lot about that. In addition, we will begin writing essays of several paragraphs in length."
- **Say something positive about the child:** This conversation deals with *good news only*. If there is already a problem with the child, save it for another day.
- **Discuss the classroom standards that you sent home:** You get the opportunity to express a commitment to high standards while answering questions about the classroom rules that you sent home. In addition, you find out which students do not take things home. In such cases, tell the parents that you will send another copy home tomorrow. This level of follow-through often convinces students that messages sent home are intended to get there.

- **Ask about any special needs of the child:** Begin by asking if there are any *medical* problems that you should know about. Asking about medical problems helps the parents relax rather than jumping to the conclusion that you are asking about academic or emotional problems. The sharing that follows will often alert you to things that are not in the student's folder. Perhaps the most significant communication, however, is that you care.
- **Emphasize that you need their help:** Stress the fact that successful students have both their parents' and their teachers' support. You might say something like this:

"As students go through school, there are usually some bumps in the road. It might be something to do with schoolwork, but it might be something hurtful that a classmate said. You might hear about it before I do.

"The kids who do best in school have both their teachers and their parents behind them. If you hear about something that is worrisome, please call me. And if I hear about something that is worrisome, I would like to feel free to call you. If we work together, we can usually iron out these bumps before they become 'real problems.'

"Before I hang up, I would like to invite you to 'Back-to-School night.' I will be sending an announcement home next week. This year it is the evening of..."

As a supplement to this first phone contact, some teachers "randomly" call the parents of one student per week to give a full report. This simple program seems to give the teacher a great deal of leverage over behavior in the classroom since some calls are less random than others.

A Departmentalized Setting

A teacher in a departmentalized setting, such as a high school, may see over 150 students in a given day. Such settings obviously need a different plan for reaching out to parents.

Some schools have highly elaborate outreach programs which include a welcoming picnic or special assembly for the parents of incoming freshmen, faculty ombudsmen assigned to each student, a student body welcoming program (i.e. Link Crew), connections to community churches and service organizations that make regular announcements of students on the honor roll, awards assemblies which include parents, and so on.

The development of such a plan, however, is an issue of *school site* management that involves the *entire faculty* rather than an issue of *classroom* management that you can implement by *yourself*. For your own good, however, you may wish to augment the school site program. It would be a good investment to make a welcoming phone call during the second week of school to the parents of the five students in each class whose misbehavior will most likely produce a parent conference before long.

Ongoing Communication with Parents

Sending Work Home

Sending work home regularly with a provision for parental feedback opens a communication link that will produce increased parental involvement in problem solving. This program takes on a somewhat different form at the elementary and secondary levels.

At the elementary level, send a folder of the child's work home every Thursday. The first writing assignment of the year might be the following:

Dear Mother and Father: This is the folder work that I have done in school this week. It will show you the kinds of assignments that I have been given and the kind of work that I have done. Some of the papers have been graded and some have not been graded. Please look over my work and sign your name in the space at the bottom of the page. If you have any comments, write in the space provided.

The folder system does more than simply send work home so that parents can monitor their child's performance. *First*, it says to the parents that the school wants their involvement. *Second*, it establishes an open communication link with parents. This can serve as an early warning system to the teacher.

At the secondary level, teachers usually send work home when a project or major assignment has been completed. Whatever the occasion for sending home work, the value of regular communication with parents will be no less at the secondary level than at the elementary level.

Commendations

When students do a good job, they need to hear about it, and so do their parents. While commendations are sometimes overdone to the point of being meaningless, they can also be an important part of teacher-parent communication. A personal note is probably the most meaningful form of commendation. For a teacher who regularly sends folders of work home, these communications represent very little additional work.

Preventative Conferences

Teachers and parents will either be allies or adversaries when they meet to deal with a student's problem. A conference with a parent when the problem is *small* can be a fairly relaxed exercise in problem solving. A conference with a parent whose child is in deep trouble is unlikely to be either relaxed or constructive.

Dealing with problems proactively when they are small can save you angry confrontations later on. Parents almost always perceive a large problem with their child as a failure on the teacher's part to deal with the problem before it became so serious.

A Final Note on Being Proactive

Most of us are capable of being either proactive or reactive in our approach to problem solving. Very few people are consistently proactive.

Focusing on potential problems can be disquieting. It is easy to give in to denial and procrastination. When we do, we back ourselves into "reactive management."

Proactive management is more than a set of procedures. It is a mindset. It is the way a person thinks when success is not negotiable, and it just happens to be easier in the long run.

The First Days of School

Our treatment of classroom structure is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, it sets the stage for the chapters on discipline management that follow.

Our friends, Harry and Rosemary Wong, have written a wonderful book, "The First Days of School," which deals with classroom structure in a more thorough fashion.

Contact them at: www.firstdaysofschool.com