

Modification of the classroom environment

“Students need structure to give them the message that the classroom is a safe, predictable place where learning happens.”

– Robert Marzano, Senior Scholar,
Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

The structure of the physical school and classroom environment contributes to effective educational programming and support for students with behaviour disabilities. A thoughtfully structured physical environment is also beneficial for other students. A safe, orderly, calm, flexible and efficient classroom environment makes instruction and learning more effective.

Begin by conducting an environmental scan to assess the physical set-up of the classroom and how it might affect learning and behaviour.



Tool 4 provides advice about assessing the classroom’s physical set-up.

Sample strategies for creating a calm, quiet physical environment

- *Reduce the noise level.*
Use carpeting on the floor, or a portion of the floor, or put tennis balls or carpet pieces on the ends of the legs of desks or chairs.
- *Assess the soundscape of the classroom.*
Note bothersome noises and take steps to reduce them; for example, buzzing or humming lights and heating pipes, the sounds of passing traffic and noises from other classrooms.
- *Provide headphones for students to use to block sound during quiet time.*
Some students are unable to block out background noises and are distracted by a teacher talking with another student or even a ticking clock.
- *Set a relaxing tone.*
Try using relaxing music when students are working individually at their desks.

- *Consider furniture layout.*
Arrange classroom furniture and partitions to create traffic patterns that discourage running and decrease students' tendencies to bother each other while they work.
- *Reduce distractions.*
Consider using window coverings to reduce the effects of noise, temperature, light and visual distractions.

Make the classroom space flexible

If space permits, organize the classroom into several distinct activity areas. For example, provide areas for computer use, science inquiries, art projects and other areas devoted to specific subjects and activities. Students learn that they are to pursue specific activities in each space.

Set up separate workspaces for different tasks or different parts of the day. For example, use a table at the front of the classroom for group instruction or seatwork. Designate tables at a different location for small group work or independent work.

Use study carrels and other independent spaces as “private offices” for students. Use these carrels to limit distractions or as a place where students can go to calm down and regain their composure after behavioural outbursts. Do not associate carrels with punishment by sending students there only when they misbehave. Invite students to think about how adults often prefer to work in independent offices or workspaces.

Have students organize their personal workspaces to promote efficient learning and develop independent work habits.

Sample strategies for helping students get organized

- *Create individual storage areas.*
Give students additional space near their desks (for example, a shelf or plastic tub) where they can store and organize personal belongings. Placing items at eye level may make materials easier to find and put away.
- *Put supplies in boxes.*
Label the boxes with picture clues as well as words. Keep these boxes in the same location so students always know where to look for them. Colour code the boxes or their labels; for example, yellow for language arts and blue for math.

- *Provide boxes filled with pencils, pens, pencil crayons, scissors, glue sticks, rulers and paper that students can borrow.*
Students can be more independent if they can borrow some classroom supplies without asking.
- *Work collaboratively with individual students to find out what they need to organize themselves.*
For example, ask them:
 - “How could you arrange the inside of your desk so your paper, pencil and eraser are always close at hand?”
 - “What should you do with your homework so you can always find it quickly?”
- *Encourage students to keep track of their own materials.*
Provide class time to label personal items and storage locations with their own names, pictures or a personal symbol in a colour of their choice.
- *Prompt students to put away items.*
Encourage them to place notebooks, pencils, erasers, rulers and other materials in the same spot at the end of each activity.
- *Some students benefit from not having anything in or on their desks to distract them.*
Empty their desks and keep the materials close at hand. Alternatively, turn the desks around so the openings face away from the students.
- *Provide quiet, nondistracting ways to “wiggle.”*
Some students find it helpful to have “fidget material” such as a sponge ball to squeeze.
- *Consider location of lockers.*
Whenever possible, assign individual lockers (versus shared lockers) in a less-travelled location to provide easier access in a less-crowded environment.
- *Make sure the locks are easy to open.*
Key locks may be more appropriate than combination locks. Look for new locks that use letters in a meaningful word, rather than a number combination.
- *Encourage students to keep their lockers organized.*
Teach specific strategies such as putting books for morning classes on the bottom and afternoon books on the top. Schedule a regular weekly clean-up to keep lockers free of clutter.
- *Provide visual reminders.*
Have students post daily schedules and monthly calendars of assignments on the inside of their locker doors.

Provide specialized areas for individual students²

Students with behaviour disabilities often benefit from designated instructional areas such as:

- a quiet area for one-to-one instruction with the teacher, a teacher assistant or a peer helper
- an area where the student may go with another student to work on specific academic skills
- an area where a student and selected other students may go to play games that develop social skills.

Teachers may also have these students go to a designated area as a predetermined consequence when they engage in a specific negative behaviour such as refusing to do assignments, disrupting the class or hurting another student. For example:

- a time-away area such as a desk or table at the back of the class or a designated area outside of the room
- a timeout area, usually outside of the room, where the student goes after displaying a significantly problematic behaviour.

For more information on the use of timeout, see pages 66 to 67.

Students with behaviour disabilities may need preferential seating in the classroom; for example, near the teacher or positive peer models, or at the front of the class on an outside row where there are fewer distractions. When students sit near the teacher, they can tune into cues such as eye contact and hand gestures, and the teacher can privately repeat instructions on a level the student can understand.

As much as possible, locate the student away from:

- auditory and visual distractions, such as windows and things to manipulate
- other students who are easily distracted or could potentially face conflicts.

2. Adapted with permission from Dwaine Souveny and Dianna Souveny, *ABCs for Success with Attention Deficit Disorders* (Red Deer, AB: Dynamic Networks, 2000).

Create a Safe Place³

Designate a small corner of the classroom where individual students can go to relax, refocus and reflect. This is different from a timeout space because it is a space students choose to go to and it should not be used as a negative consequence. Rather, students can use this area when they are upset or angry and need time alone to calm down and gain control of themselves.

Pick a spot in the classroom that offers some privacy but the student also has a clear view of the classroom. At the same time, the teacher needs to be able to clearly see who is in the Safe Place at any time.

Furnish with a soft chair and a bag of items such as a squishy ball or a few animals that might help students calm themselves.

Introduce the concept of the Safe Place by learning and practising a self-calming strategy such as STAR (Stop, Take a deep breath And Relax) and discussing the rules of using the Safe Place.

1. You can go to the Safe Place when you are angry, sad or want to be alone.
2. Only one person at a time may be in the Safe Place.
3. If you need the Safe Place when someone is in it, you could:
 - wait until he or she is out
 - ask him or her if you could have a turn
 - sit at a table near the Safe Place quietly and alone until it is available
 - use another strategy to help calm yourself.

Develop effective classroom routines

Teaching a new routine requires clear and concise vocabulary, direct instruction, practice and monitoring. This process may take from two to six weeks.

Students with behaviour disabilities may need extra assistance with the following kinds of routines:

- coming into class
- interacting with others
- requesting the teacher's attention, permission or assistance
- accessing supplies or equipment
- maintaining time on task

3. Adapted with permission from Becky Bailey, *7 Skills Poster Set* (Oviedo, FL: Loving Guidance, 2003), www.ConsciousDiscipline.com.

- completing assignments
- using unstructured time
- requesting choices or alternatives
- requesting time to talk to the teacher about something personal
- knowing what to do in emergency situations such as fire drills.

Sample strategies for developing effective classroom routines

- *Directly teach all routines.*
“This is the way we set up for math,” “Give me five means ...”
- *Practise and reinforce routines frequently.*
This is especially important at the beginning of the school year and when a new student joins the class.
- *Generate checklists for specific routines.*
Strategically post these step-by-step explanations around the classroom—in the coatroom, listening corner, reading centre, on students’ desks.
- *Encourage students to use self-talk as they follow the routines.*
Model and practise what students should do in each routine, using pictures as well as words. Keep the routines short at first (one to three steps) and gradually add extra steps.
- *Use correction, not consequences, when teaching routines.*
Focus on guided practice and constructive feedback to help students master new routines.
- *Encourage students to develop their own routines.*
Help them develop sequentially ordered lists of activities and tasks they need to complete regularly; for example, getting ready to work or packing up homework.