

Modification of the school environment

“A school can create a coherent environment, a climate, more potent than any single influence ... so potent that for at least six hours a day it can override almost everything else in the lives of children”

– Ron Edmonds, former director of the Centre for Urban Studies at Harvard University

To encourage positive behaviour and respond to problem behaviour, consider modifying the environment: schedules, traffic patterns, routines, procedures, and instructional processes and materials. For example, make problem areas off limits at certain times of the day or increase adult supervision in those areas. Or alter class transition time by grade to reduce the number of students in the hallways at any one time.

Identify areas of the school where negative behaviour is most likely to occur and then look for creative and simple ways to restructure the physical environment to make it safer and more orderly for everyone. The solutions can be simple; for example, making name tags and assigning seats in the lunchroom or installing new boot racks nearer an entrance.

The majority of behavioural difficulties happen during less structured times and in large common areas such as the playground or hallways. Schools can eliminate many of these difficulties through strategic adult supervision of targeted activities and areas.

Making supervision active

Increasing adult supervision is important. Supervising adults need to understand and agree with the school-wide rules, and be able to effectively teach, monitor and provide positive feedback about following the rules in all locations. Supervision needs to be a deliberate and active process.

Active supervision involves:

- moving
- scanning
- positive contact
- positive reinforcement

- “on the spot” teaching of social skills
- immediate consequences for negative behaviour.



To help staff develop active supervision skills, consider training them to model and practise these skills, and then use peer observation to provide feedback. **Tool 1: Active Supervision Observation Feedback** in Appendix A provides a framework that staff can use to observe each other and give feedback.

Keep moving²

Supervisors should move constantly, giving students the impression that the adults are everywhere at once. Constant movement also increases opportunities for staff to have positive contacts with more students, and provide behaviour management and support. Movement should be planned, constant and deliberate unless attention or action is required at a specific location. Target known problem areas, activities and individuals at a higher rate.

Staff require a plan to guide their supervision activities. For example, “Complete two figure-eights across the playground within five minutes each.” However, some students may use predictable supervisory routines as opportunities for inappropriate behaviour. Vary the patterns of movement throughout the day and from day to day.

Use scanning as a “long-range” tool²

Common areas such as hallways, cafeterias, playgrounds and gymnasiums are difficult to supervise effectively. Distant, obscure or hidden areas present challenges.

When supervising common areas, staff need to be able to systemically scan more distant parts of an area and recognize signs or sounds that may indicate problem behaviour.

- *Maintain constant visual movement* whether standing, walking or talking. Shift your field of view and pay attention to visual indicators of behaviour issues. This type of scanning increases opportunities for more natural and positive contact such as greeting students, having brief conversations and acknowledging positive behaviour. It also allows you to make eye contact with students outside your immediate physical area, and smile and wave to students who are engaged in positive behaviour.
- *Look at the students’ behaviour*, not just their games or physical appearance. Watch for subtle contextual, physical or behavioural clues that may be signs of distress.

2. Adapted with permission from Sopris West Educational Services. *Best Behavior: Building Positive Behavior Support in Schools* by Jeff Sprague © 2005, pp. 74, 76–78.

- *Look at the big picture*, not just one student or activity but as many as possible. On the sports field, attend to individual behaviours rather than watching the game.
- *Identify and attend to signs that are typically associated with negative behaviour.* Watch for games breaking up for no apparent reason; students frowning and gesturing to others, perhaps angrily; students seemingly shrinking back from a peer or peers; quick, rough movements for no apparent reason; someone running away from a peer or peers outside of an apparent game; frightened looks; or someone making a fist or obscene gesture.
- *Listen.* Verbal cues may also indicate negative behaviour. While scanning, listen for angry or plaintive tones of voice, arguing, and panicked and bossy voices or commands.
- *Recognize potential trouble spots and scan them often.* For example, if tetherball frequently leads to verbal and physical aggression, supervisors need to keep an eye on this game and watch for warning signs. (Has the game stopped? Is someone holding the ball and keeping it away from others?) Staff can analyze the data provided by supervisors to identify problem areas, as they will shift throughout the school year.
- *Recognize situations that may precede problem behaviour.* Problem behaviour such as aggression is typically preceded by arguing, rough play, high states of arousal, unsportsmanlike conduct and over-competitiveness. Supervisors who recognize these precursors and immediately reinforce appropriate behaviour can often prevent the situation from escalating.
- *Set and readjust physical boundaries.* Clearly communicate about the areas that students are free to use. Consider readjusting the boundaries to accommodate adequate supervision. For example, you may not need to, or be able to, supervise several large playing fields. Consider choosing one play area and making remoter areas out of bounds during recess and lunch hour.
- *Identify areas that supervisors typically cannot see and ensure that they are regularly supervised.* These areas might include washrooms, unused hallways and parking lots.
- *Know individual students who have been identified as having particular difficulties.* Informally check in with them to give feedback and prevent problems.
- *Minimize the time spent dealing with problem behaviour.* Supervisors need to maximize their movement and scanning opportunities. If you can't solve a problem or correct a behaviour in two minutes or less, refer the problem to the office (depending on its severity) or to some other prearranged place. If the problem is not severe and the solution can wait, defer lengthy intervention until students are back in class or in other structured activities.

For example, the supervising teacher could give the student (and/or the classroom teacher) a consequence slip listing a time for further discussion. Then the supervisor can finish correcting the student in private and without interfering with supervision activities. When problems are identified, solve or correct them quickly, fairly, consistently and as privately as possible. Then move on.

Keep it positive

School staff should actively pursue and create opportunities for positive contact with students. Positive contact focuses attention on and increases the likelihood of positive behaviour while decreasing the incidence of inappropriate behaviour.

Don't assume that all positive contacts have to be prompted by or related to a specific behaviour. Actively project a friendly, helpful, open demeanour that communicates caring, trust and respect. A positive contact can be as simple as, "Good morning, Lee. It's good to see you."

Increasing positive contacts gives staff more opportunities to provide friendly reminders or "precorrections" that help students "get it right before they get it wrong."

For example, just before lunch is a good time to remind students to pick up garbage. "When you are in the lunchroom today, think about picking up after yourself. The lunchroom and school grounds are looking pretty good these days. Let's work together to keep the school looking green and clean."

Just before dismissing senior high students, a teacher could remind students with vehicles to drive safely. "If you are driving, please be mindful in the parking lot. That means taking your time, looking out for pedestrians and other vehicles, being courteous to other drivers and slowing down. Have a safe trip home."

Reinforce, reinforce, reinforce

In contrast to positive contact, positive reinforcement is contingent upon specific student behaviour. That is, the student must demonstrate a specific behaviour that the school has targeted for reinforcement. For example: "Lee, I saw you helping Susan pick up those books she dropped – that showed thoughtfulness. That's going to make a difference in her day." The statement should clearly describe the behaviour that is being reinforced.

Deliver reinforcement immediately, or as soon as possible after observing the targeted behaviour. A time lag between the behaviour and reinforcement is less effective, and the student might connect the reinforcement to an unrelated behaviour.

Strive to be consistent when providing positive reinforcement and when correcting behaviour.

Have a variety of staff members reinforce specific kinds of behaviour regularly, in different environments throughout the school.

Follow the four-to-one ratio rule. That is, seek to provide four positive comments for every one negative or corrective statement. High rates of positive reinforcement increase the likelihood that students will engage in the targeted positive behaviour.

Respond with instruction

Active supervision creates opportunities to teach positive behaviour to individual students or small groups of students. Supervisors should respond to inappropriate behaviour immediately, without arguing or criticizing, using a step-by-step teaching approach, and basing the intervention on a clear and shared understanding of specific behavioural expectations.

For example, a supervisor might respond as follows when a student runs in the hallway.

1. **Get the student's attention in a low-key way.**
("Jacob, wait a minute.")
2. **Tell the student exactly what behaviour is expected.**
("You need to walk in the hallways, on the right side, with your head up so you can see other students.")
3. **Show the student the expected behaviour, what it looks like and how it's done.**
("Here's what walking in the hallway needs to look like—this is about fast enough, and stay in the right lane.")
4. **Have the student practise the behaviour.**
("Now show me that you've got it. Please walk to the end of the hallway and back.")
5. **Acknowledge the student for successfully demonstrating the behaviour.**
("That's it. Much safer and not too fast. Good job.")
6. **If necessary, reteach the skill.**
("You need to slow down a little, and stay in that right lane so no one gets hurt. Please try again.")
7. **Test the student's mastery of the skill by watching for the behaviour during natural routines.**
(Next day on the way to the lunchroom, "Good walking in the hallways, Jacob. Looking out for other people makes the hallway safe for everyone.")

Although this type of instruction is informal, supervising teachers may find it helpful to record incidents so they can check back for improvement or provide necessary follow-up as needed.

Deliver negative consequences promptly

A serious negative behaviour requires a negative consequence. Have all staff agree on the definition of a serious behaviour, the type of consequences and the process for enforcing these consequences in advance.

To deliver negative consequences effectively and efficiently:

- Take students aside. As much as possible, avoid reprimanding or potentially embarrassing students in front of others.
- Define the problem behaviour in a calm, businesslike manner and focus on the appropriate behaviour. Avoid being drawn into an argument.
- Ask students to state the appropriate behaviour for the situation. If they can't or won't, state the appropriate behaviour and ask them to repeat it to you.
- If possible, give students an opportunity to demonstrate and practise appropriate behaviour. Consequences offer opportunities to teach better behaviour.
- Tell students what the school-prescribed consequences are, and apply consequences immediately or as soon as practical.

For example, if a junior high student is in the hallway during class time and trying to get the attention of a peer in another classroom, an intervening teacher might say: "Fran, leaving during class when you need to is a privilege. It's disappointing that you are using this privilege to disturb the learning of others. You know the consequence for this behaviour. I will notify all of your subject teachers and you will not be allowed to leave during class for one week."

"Please talk about this incident with your parents. I will send them a letter within a week to let them know about it. I hope you will use this opportunity to talk to your parents about your commitment to learning."