Creating a Positive Classroom Climate

The school and classroom climate have a significant impact on student behaviour and achievement. Important elements in a positive classroom climate include a sense of respect, security and safety, engagement and humour.1

Respect

Both students and the teacher have a right to be treated with respect in the classroom. They also have a responsibility to treat each other with respect. Respect involves recognizing that all students have dignity, worth and something important to contribute. Teachers need to know their students in order to connect with them on an intellectual level. They also need to communicate to students that they believe in their ability to learn and contribute to the class.

Consider the following strategies for promoting respect.

- Become familiar with student records and backgrounds.
- Take a sincere interest in all students and showing understanding and concern for students’ personal needs and outside interests.
- Ensure that students are disciplined fairly, firmly and consistently.
- Treat all students with respect and courtesy.
- Call on all students equally to answer questions and make other contributions in class.
- Direct a variety of questions at students to challenge them to think.
- Give students enough time to respond to questions in class. Failing to wait for a student’s answer may communicate to the student that he or she is perceived to be less intelligent.
- Give students appropriate, immediate feedback to their responses in class by affirming correct answers, encouraging students to try again, or giving further information to help them arrive at the correct answer.

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• Maintain verbal and visual contact with all students during class. This individualized attention demonstrates that all students are involved and may minimize discipline problems.

• Have extra supplies of classroom materials such as pencils and paper available that students can politely request if they forget theirs.

Security and Safety

Students need a safe and caring environment in which to explore concepts, feelings, ideas and issues. Setting expectations and limits are critical to the emotional safety of students. Students should feel free to speak without ridicule, teasing, taunting or other humiliation. Many activities in Knowledge and Employability courses involve exploring personal interests and experiences as a starting point for learning. Inherent in asking students to share personal information in the classroom is the issue of confidentiality.

Consider the following strategies for promoting security and safety.

• Act with sensitivity and discretion when handling information that is personal or could cause embarrassment or distress to a student or family.

• Anticipate where a discussion is going in order to protect individual students from revealing inappropriate personal information.

• Be considerate of student privacy and share information about students on a need-to-know basis. Be aware of how the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPP) affects policy and practice in your school.

• Make time available for individual help during class or after school hours.

• Respect students’ right to privacy by establishing routines that allow students to “pass” when they do not wish to contribute to a specific discussion. This respect for boundaries extends to teachers. Teachers have the right to decline to share personal information or opinions on any topic.

Engagement

Engagement begins with teachers projecting a sense of anticipation about the topic and activities, and sharing that enthusiasm with students. When students feel that their learning needs are being met, they feel excitement about what they are doing. If they enjoy class time—if the activities and experiences interest them—they will actively participate. From the start, students need to know that Knowledge and Employability courses are full of rich content, with many
opportunities to explore and develop new skills and concepts. Throughout the course, they need to see the value of Knowledge and Employability instruction and learning activities. If they believe that what they are doing has value, they will be willing to invest time and energy.

Consider the following strategies for promoting engagement.

- Provide students with a comprehensive course outline that explains how and when they will be working on specific skills and concepts.
- Explain how assessment and evaluation will be carried out.
- Provide learning tasks that are meaningful and challenging, yet provide for success.
- Use the personal experiences of students as starting points to link the practice and transfer of skills in the classroom to the home and community.
- Take advantage of specific outcomes that provide opportunities to explore personally relevant topics.
- When possible, allow students to choose topics and issues that interest them.
- Encourage students to become less teacher dependent and more in charge of themselves.
- Expect students to monitor their own behaviour and learning, and to find intrinsic rewards in doing their personal best.

Humour

Humour is a life-management skill. Students—and teachers—who can see the lighter side of things manage stress more effectively.

Consider the following strategies for promoting engagement.

- Be able to laugh at yourself and minor incidents in the classroom. Acknowledge and enjoy spontaneous humour as it happens.
- Use cartoons, word play, and humorous observations and stories to provide humour.
- Be straightforward and tell students when humour in the classroom is inappropriate and unwelcome.
- Avoid over-reacting. Recognize that adolescents are still learning the nuances of humour, and use incidents of inappropriate humour as teachable moments.
- Give students guidelines that include the following points.
  - Think before saying something rude or insulting, even if it sounds funny.
  - Never use humour to embarrass or humiliate someone.
  - There is no place for off-colour humour, stereotyping, or prejudicial comments or actions in the classroom.
Managing Behaviours in the Classroom

A key part of establishing a healthy climate is developing a plan for preventing and correcting inappropriate behaviours. Generally, a behaviour management plan involves the following:

- establishing rules or expectations, and ensuring that students understand these
- establishing and enforcing logical consequences if expectations are not met
- providing positive feedback when expectations are met
- developing behaviour modification strategies
- developing general preventative strategies and specific strategies for working with students with behavioural problems or attention difficulties.

The following questions can be used to help assess the behaviour management plan in place:

- Does the plan treat students with dignity?
- Does the plan include opportunities for students to learn new skills, and to acquire a range of acceptable responses to frustration, teasing and other negative experiences?
- Are the consequences appropriate to the behaviour?
- Does the plan include periodic reviews or allow for the review of programming (including seating arrangements) that may be contributing to behaviour problems?

Classroom Rules and Expectations
Clear behavioural expectations are part of creating a safe and positive environment. They are necessary parameters for constructive interactions to ensure students maintain self-respect and respect of others. Classroom rules and behavioural expectations should be brief, clear, explicit and written in positive language. Classroom routines and guidelines also need to be flexible and adaptable to the changing nature and needs of the students. For example, there may be tighter parameters early in the year that broaden as students develop new skills and attitudes.

Sample rules that could apply at all grade levels include the following:

- Bring all materials to class (if need be stipulate pencil, paper, text, etc.).
- Be in your seat and ready to work when the bell rings.
- Be polite to all students and staff.
- Stay in your seat and listen when someone is talking.
- Respect school and people’s property.

3. Reproduced with permission from Edmonton Public School District No. 7.
It is important to make classroom rules and expectations explicit. At the beginning of the year, discuss expectations with students and post rules in a visible spot in the classroom. A Student Code of Conduct or a Bill of Rights could outline behavioural expectations and contribute to a positive classroom climate. Classroom expectations can also be reinforced by communicating them to parents in a clear and positive manner through class newsletters or other methods. Whatever strategy is used, the key to success is giving students opportunities to discuss and reflect on what they need to do, why they need to do it and what the potential consequences of their behaviour, both positive and negative, will be.

**Consequences**

In order for rules and expectations to be effective, it is essential that they are enforced with logical consequences every time they are ignored. Consider the following guidelines for establishing and administering consequences for inappropriate behaviour.

- Seek student input when establishing consequences.
- Vary consequences depending on the cause (for example, attention seeking, revenge) or the severity (for example, breaking a rule, intimidating other students).
- Apply consequences fairly and consistently.
- Avoid the following common pitfalls in administering logical consequences:
  - Feeling sorry for the student. This may teach students to feel sorry for themselves or indicate to the student that it pays to make the teacher feel guilty.
  - Being inconsistent or allowing second or third chances. Inconsistent negative consequence may actually reinforce the behaviour.
  - Demonstrating impatience or anger, using shame or humiliation, or “rubbing it in” (through words, voice tone or body language). Anything that increases the student’s anger against the teacher decreases his or her willingness to assess the consequences as logical and to cooperate in the situation.
  - Choosing a consequence that is difficult to follow through on.
  - Talking too much. Excessive talking can divert from the issue, reinforce the student goal and teach “teacher deafness.”
  - Fearing the consequence is too easy. Suffering is not an essential or necessary part of the learning situation.

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4. Adapted with permission from Edmonton Public School District No. 7.
– Reacting to more than one behaviour at a time—particularly reacting to the way the student takes the consequence (e.g., by not demonstrating enough remorse or trying to get out of it).
– Giving way to expediency—at the moment, it is sometimes easier to punish or overlook than to take the time and thought to initiate logical consequences and carry them through adequately and peacefully.

Positive Feedback
Positive feedback should instill in the student a sense of trust, confidence, acceptance and appreciation, and may at times be offered with a touch of humour. Positive feedback includes both encouragement and praise. Encouragement from teachers can be an effective way to make students feel appreciated and “in charge” and to make them aware of the link between effort and success. When properly used, praise can also be an appropriate strategy for teaching; however, constant or undeserved praise can have a negative effect because it signals to the student that one does not really have to work hard to get it. Similarly, if praise is used as a manipulative device to promote greater effort, the student may become “praise dependent” and feel no sense of intrinsic motivation.

Positive feedback should be authentic, sincere and conveyed using a natural tone of voice. In addition, consider the following characteristics and examples of effective positive feedback.

Effective positive feedback … Example
– focuses attention on the effort and the task, rather than on the student
– encourages the student to learn to monitor own learning and appreciate intrinsic worth of effort
– promotes continued effort by focusing on individual effort and self-improvement, rather than on comparisons among students
– builds on strong points and successes
– encourages self-acceptance and faith that one can learn from mistakes
– is specific, simple and direct
– helps eliminate fear of failure

“Try again. You are giving it a good effort. Soon you'll have it down pat.”
“You have improved in …”
“What would you do differently if you had another opportunity to work on this?”
“You do a good job of …”
“Let's try doing this together this time.”
“I appreciate your help. The room looks much better now that it's clean and tidy.”
“I'm glad you enjoy …”
Preventative Strategies

Because prevention of inappropriate behaviours is preferable to correction, it is important to develop preventative strategies that emphasize a healthy and respectful classroom through rational, nonjudgemental, low-key responses.

Consider the following strategies for preventing inappropriate behaviours.

- Check your own emotional state and responses, and avoid reinforcing attention-seeking behaviour.
- Maintain a positive attitude and a sense of humour.
- Scan or move about the classroom to keep in touch with all students.
- Elicit the cooperation of peer leaders in establishing classroom climate.
- Examine programming variables such as pace, appropriateness of objectives and resources or variety of presentation.
- Listen to what students are really saying.
- Make use of prearranged, nonthreatening verbal and nonverbal cues to get students’ attention such as “please listen” or blinking the lights, as well as cues to let students know if their behaviour is getting out of hand, such as making eye contact, moving next to the student or calmly mentioning a name.
- Allow students to move to a less-taxing task or to leave a group or the room if he or she becomes too frustrated.
- Prepare students for changes in routine or transitions from one activity to another.
- Gear actions and responses to knowledge of a student; for example, respect personal space, be aware of body language clues, permit some verbal venting.
- Work at understanding students’ behaviours and their root causes.
- Teach students social and communication skills, such as listening, organization, following direction and responding.
- If inappropriate behaviours do occur, intervene early by focusing on the problem, not the student, and by taking steps to prevent the escalation of behaviours.

Preventing Escalation of Acting-out Behaviours

The responses a teacher provides can, on occasion, exacerbate rather than diffuse a situation. It is important to identify the steps leading to escalated behaviour, to anticipate the student’s reaction and provide a different response, to help the student manage frustration and gain self-control and finally, to teach the student alternative behaviours to replace inappropriate ones.

Consider the following example chain of escalated behaviour.4

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael you need to start on your assignment.</td>
<td>What assignment?</td>
<td>Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The work you didn't finish during class.</td>
<td>I did finish it.</td>
<td>Argues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well let me see it then.</td>
<td>I don't have it now.</td>
<td>Continues to argue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You will either have to do it again or show me it.</td>
<td>I am not going to do it twice. It's not fair.</td>
<td>Does not comply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You will have to do it now.</td>
<td>Make me.</td>
<td>Defies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you don't do it now you will have to do it in detention.</td>
<td>F____ you.</td>
<td>Is verbally abusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That's disrespectful.</td>
<td>Throws books on floor; pushes desk over; says I am going to kill you.</td>
<td>Intimidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office referral.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That's it.</td>
<td>Grabs the teacher by the wrist, swings at the teacher.</td>
<td>Is physically abusive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Instead of getting into a power struggle, teachers can use strategies such as the following to defuse the situation.

- Withdraw from the conflict; ignore the challenge and discuss the issue with the student at another time; for example, incomplete assignments can be discussed with the student in the context of an assessment or report card interview.
- Offer a choice (e.g., “Do you want to work on the assignment over lunch break or after school? Come in early tomorrow to finish it or complete it at home tonight and bring it in?”)
- Shift responsibility (e.g., “I would be happy to help you with your assignment when you are ready to work on it. Remember it is worth 25 per cent of your course grade.”)
- Be aware of the tone, volume and cadence of your voice; use a calm approach. Make use of humour.
- Be aware of body language; make eye contact but do not encroach on a student’s personal space or take an aggressive stance.
- Make sure the student does not lose face. For instance, talk to the student privately rather than in front of peers. See Behaviour Interviews below for a process you can follow.
Behaviour Modification

Students who regularly display disruptive or inappropriate behaviour may need additional intervention, structures or supports. The goal of any intervention should be to help the student:

- clarify and understand the problem
- take responsibility for the problem
- generate a menu of alternative behavioural responses
- learn skills and strategies to realistically monitor his or her own behaviour
- be accountable for all of his or her behaviour, including successes.

**Behaviour Interviews**

A common type of intervention is a one-on-one behaviour interview. The following sample process may be used for conducting behaviour interviews.

1. Arrange a “wait time” in a quiet neutral environment before conducting a behaviour interview with the student. This wait time provides an opportunity for the student to calm down and regain self-control and lessens the likelihood that the student will view the teacher’s attention as a reward for the unwanted behaviour. The wait time should be solitary and uninterrupted.

2. Begin the interview when the student is completely calm. Take notes during the interview and date them. Use a nonthreatening tone, without judgement or blame. If there are two students involved in the incident, both should be involved. Remind them to take turns talking and to listen to each other.

3. Ask: what did you do that caused you to be here? The purpose of this question is to have the student identify and take responsibility for his or her own behaviours. Have the student be specific; for example, if he or she used profanity, have him or her repeat the words.

4. Ask: what happens when you behave this way? Do you think you made some unwise choices? Why were the choices unwise? These questions require the student to make judgements regarding the value of the behaviours. It is appropriate to point out problems and consequences arising from the behaviours that the student may have overlooked.

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5. Adapted with permission from Edmonton Public School District No. 7.
5. Ask: what are some better choices you might make next time?
The student is required to formulate a plan for making better choices. You may provide help, but the plan should belong to the student. Go over the options with the student using various scenarios. Make sure the student is aware of several responses in each situation that would result in positive outcomes. Role-playing and rehearsing these ideas will increase the likelihood of the student using them.

6. Have the student formulate a timeline for the plan. If two students are involved, they may be left to create a plan of their own and share it when they are ready. Ask when the plan will begin. Ideally, it should start when they walk out the door, but students must own the start time to increase their investment in its success.

7. Remind students that there is a timeline and that there will be follow-up. If the plan does not work, develop another. If the plan is successful, commend the students. Students must know that it is OK to admit something isn’t working and to try again.

**Behaviour contracts**

Behaviour contracts or structured reinforcement programs involve written agreements between a teacher and a student and sometimes include an aide, the principal and a parent. Contracts should only be used when the student has a desire to change his or her behaviour and all involved in the contract are willing to cooperate. The contract should target a specific, short-term objective rather than a long-term goal. Steps in establishing a contract include: arranging a meeting with all parties, selecting the specific objective to be targeted, describing the behaviour in precise terms, identifying rewards for demonstrating the target behaviour, writing the contract, getting everyone to review and sign the contract and agreeing when it will be reviewed. See [Student Plan of Action](#) for a sample template for behaviour contracts.
Student Plan of Action

Name __________________________________  Date ______________________

What did I do that got me sent out of class/school:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

The problem I can deal with right now is:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

What I will do immediately to improve:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Interim review dates:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Teacher’s Signature ___________________________  Student’s Signature ___________________________

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