

# Modify Classroom Environment to Decrease Problem Behavior

## Why Is This Strategy Useful?

Disruptive behavior interrupts classroom instruction and routines, and interferes with the learning of both the disruptive student and his or her peers. Statistics show that approximately 50 percent of all classroom time is taken up by activities other than instruction, and discipline problems are responsible for a large portion of this lost instructional time. Teachers can reduce the frequency of students' disruptive behavior in the classroom by identifying factors that are linked to disruptive behavior and exploring ways to change them. This strategy is based on two main principles widely supported by the literature: (1) preventative classroom management, with particular emphasis on teachers' attention to specific environmental variables that evoke problem behaviors; and (2) direct and differentiated instructional strategies to increase student engagement and decrease problem behaviors.

## Description of Strategy

The two core features of this strategy are consist communication about behavior expectations, and making sure that the type of activities are matched to students' learning styles. These features are detailed below:

- 1) *Establish an orderly and positive classroom environment by teaching and reinforcing rules and routines.* Expectations should be conveyed daily through explicit teaching strategies, modeling positive behavior, and building positive relationships among students and adults. Students need concrete, positively-stated guidelines on how to conduct themselves in a variety of situations, including:
  - Arriving at and leaving the classroom.
  - Distributing materials and turning in assignments.
  - Requesting help from the teacher.
  - Transitioning to new activities or settings.
  - Experiencing interruptions in routines, such as fire drills or substitute teachers.
  - Working independently and in groups.
  - Returning from recess or another class (art, music, or P.E.).

Younger elementary students also can benefit from constant visual reminders, such as pictures that are enlarged and posted in the classroom of students exhibiting expected behaviors (for example, sitting at their desk, cleaning a learning center, or lining up for recess). Older elementary school students might also need reminders about behavioral expectations, particularly after vacations. Taking time at the beginning of the school year and revisiting expectations regularly will develop students' ownership of a positive classroom environment. When students know and master classroom behavioral expectations, researchers recommend that teachers gradually reduce prompts for appropriate behavior and allow routines to be initiated by normal events (the bell ringing). Similarly, symbolic rewards, such as tokens,

gradually can be replaced by other forms of reinforcement and natural consequences, such as allowing students who clean up quickly to use their extra time to do a preferred activity.

- 2) *Revisit classroom layout, agenda, procedures and routines.* Here are few examples of questions that teacher may ask when reflecting on current practice:
  - Do I schedule the most academically demanding activities during the times of day when most students' engagement is high?
  - Is the length and pacing of my lesson suited to my students' developmental abilities?
  - Do I offer my students choices in how they participate in learning activities?

## Research Evidence

A national panel of experts reviewed the research evidence about interventions to reduce behavior problems in elementary school classrooms and found this practice to be among the key components of successful interventions. The panel determined that this practice is based on rigorous and sufficient research evidence encompassing students with different socio-demographic characteristics and in different settings.

## Sample Studies Supporting this Strategy

**Epstein, M., Atkins, M., Cullinan, D., Kutash, K., and Weaver, R. (2008). *Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom: A Practice Guide (NCEE #2008-012)*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.**

Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides>.

Designed for elementary school educators and school- and district-level administrators, this guide offers prevention, implementation, and schoolwide strategies that can be used to reduce problematic behavior that interferes with the ability of students to attend to and engage fully in instructional activities.

## Additional Resources

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Available at: <http://www.casel.org/>