Responsive Classroom®

Creating Safe, Challenging, and Joyful Elementary Classrooms and Schools

The *Responsive Classroom* approach is a way of teaching that emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe school community. Developed by classroom teachers in 1981 and continually refined to meet schools' needs, the approach consists of practical strategies for helping children build academic and social-emotional competencies day in and day out. In urban, suburban, and rural settings nationwide, educators using these strategies report increased student engagement and academic progress, along with fewer discipline problems.

Guiding Principles

The *Responsive Classroom* approach is informed by the work of educational theorists and the experiences of exemplary classroom teachers. Seven principles guide this approach:

- The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
- How children learn is as important as what they learn: Process and content go hand in hand.
- The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
- To be successful academically and socially, children need a set of social skills: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control.
- Knowing the children we teach—individually, culturally, and developmentally—is as important as knowing the content we teach.
- Knowing the families of the children we teach and working with them as partners is essential to children's education.
- How the adults at school work together is as important as their individual competence: Lasting change begins with the adult community.

Classroom Practices

At the heart of the *Responsive Classroom* approach are ten classroom practices:

Morning Meeting—gathering as a whole class each morning to greet one another, share news, and warm up for the day ahead

Rule Creation—helping students create classroom rules that allow all class members to meet their learning goals

Interactive Modeling—teaching children to notice and internalize expected behaviors through a unique modeling technique

Positive Teacher Language—using words and tone to promote children's active learning and self-discipline

Logical Consequences—responding to misbehavior in a way that allows children to fix and learn from their mistakes while preserving their dignity

Guided Discovery—introducing materials using a format that encourages creativity and responsibility

Academic Choice—increasing student motivation by differentiating instruction and allowing students teacher-structured choices in their work

Classroom Organization—setting up the physical room in ways that encourage independence, cooperation, and productivity

Working with Families—hearing families' insights and helping them understand the school's teaching approaches

Collaborative Problem Solving—using conferencing, role playing, and other strategies to engage students in problem-solving

Four Components of Morning Meeting

1. **Greeting:** Children greet each other by name. The greetings are structured and often include shaking hands, clapping, singing, and other activities.

Morning Meeting

2. **Sharing:** Students share some news of interest, usually personal news, and respond to each other, articulating their thoughts, feelings, and questions in a positive manner.

3. **Group Activity:** The whole class does a short activity together, building class cohesion through active participation.

4. **News and Announcements:** Students practice academic skills and build their sense of community by reading and discussing a daily message written by the teacher.

Morning Meeting and Class Meeting

It's important to note that Morning Meeting is not the same as a class meeting. Class meeting is a strategy for group problem-solving. Teachers often hold regularly scheduled class meetings to discuss ongoing issues, but this meeting is never done in place of Morning Meeting. Instead, many teachers reserve a thirty minute afternoon period one day a week. Not all teachers want or need to hold regular class meetings; some teachers schedule class meetings as needed to resolve a particular problem.

Formats for class meetings are described in *Teaching Children to Care* (Charney), *Positive Discipline* (Nelsen), and *Ways We Want Our Class to Be* (Developmental Studies Center).

Discipline in the
Responsive Classroom

Discipline in the *Responsive Classroom* approach is both proactive and reactive.

- Proactively, we work with children to create, teach, and practice classroom rules.

- Reactively, we use logical consequences to help children regain control, make amends, and get back on track when they forget or choose not to take care of themselves or each other.

Rules and Logical Consequences

Characteristics

The teacher:

- Respects the child and the child's goal of being a significant community member

- Shares power and control with students, building on their capabilities, teaching them necessary social skills, and giving them new responsibilities when they are ready to handle them

- Uses encouraging and empowering language to support children's success

- Uses logical consequences to help children fix their mistakes and regain self-control

- Values mutual problem-solving as a tool to teach ethical thinking and respectful community membership

- Guides students to think for themselves and act in caring and responsible ways

Goals of Logical Consequences

1. To give children the chance to regain self-control

2. To help children:

    - Recognize the connection between their actions and the outcomes of those actions

    - Fix problems caused by their mistake or misbehavior

    - Make amends and preserve their relationships

    - Avoid similar problems in the future

3. To preserve the dignity of the child and the integrity of the group

4. To keep children safe

Characteristics of Logical Consequences

■ Respectful

The teacher's words and tone of voice communicate respect for the children. Focus is on the behavior rather than on the child's character. For example, when one child pushes another, the teacher tells the child to "stop pushing," rather than telling the child to "stop being a bully."

■ Relevant

The consequence is directly related to the children's actions. For example, if a group of children are supposed to be working together on a project but spend the time talking about the weekend, a relevant consequence would be that they don't work together anymore that day.

■ Realistic

The consequence must be something the children can reasonably do and that the teacher can follow through on. For example, a child who writes on a desk could be asked to clean that desk, but not twenty desks and not at a time that's a hardship for either the child or teacher.

Three Kinds of Logical Consequences

1. "You break it—you fix it."

Children take responsibility for fixing, as best they can, any problem or mess they created.

Sample teacher language: Michael, I see crayons, pens, and tools all over the floor. It's time to clean up the tools and then show me how you can make a calm trip down the hall.

Apology of Action is a form of "you break it—you fix it" that attempts to fix hurt feelings and damaged relationships. Children go beyond saying "I'm sorry" to making amends for the hurtful behavior. (See "Apology of Action: Teaching Children to Make Amends," page 118)

Apology of Action

Ways We Break People's Feelings →	Ways We Fix People's Feelings
1. Called you a name.	Makes a list of nice things he/she could say about you.
2. Snapped or yelled at you.	Does something nice for you to make you smile.

2. Loss of privilege.

Establishing rules together implies trust among everyone in the group. With this trust come the privileges of the classroom: using materials and work areas, working with friends, choosing a learning activity, joining a reading or math group. When a student (or group of students) breaches that trust, for example, by being careless or unsafe, a logical consequence is for the teacher to take away the related privilege until the child shows a readiness to handle the privilege. The teacher also provides a process that helps the child learn and demonstrate that she is ready to try again.

Sample teacher language: [illegible] the art area is so messy. It's closed for the day. I'm thinking about what we need to do to fix it up and keep it clear. We'll talk after lunch.

Luis, you may not use scissors anymore today. Tomorrow you can try again, using them safely.

Mary, the climbing structure is off limits for you until you can tell me how you'll play safely on it.

3. Time-out

A child who is beginning to lose control in a way that is disruptive or that compromises safety is asked to leave the scene. During the time away from the group, the child's job is to regain self-control so she can come back to the group and participate in a positive way. (See "Guidelines for using time-out effectively" on the next page.)

Sample teacher language: Mark, take a break.