

# Better Teaching<sup>®</sup>

Tips & Techniques to Improve Student Achievement

Elementary  
EDITION

Northeast USD 246  
Making Success Our Business



Bringing Lessons to Life

## Fascinate students with history of toys



December is a month when many students are thinking about new toys. But what do they know about *old* toys? Toys and games have a rich history, dating back more than 6,000 years to ancient Babylonia! Students will have fun and sharpen their skills as they research and report on the origins of familiar toys.

Here are some suggestions for this “playful” project:

1. **Find a good source** on the history of toys and games. One suggestion is the time line at “The History of Toys and Games” from The History Channel. Find it at [www.history.com/exhibits/toys/timeline.html](http://www.history.com/exhibits/toys/timeline.html).
2. **Assign a toy or game** to each student, or have students work in pairs or small groups.
3. **Ask students to research** and share facts about their toy or game, including: the year it was first used—for ancient toys this will be

approximate, but for later toys it should be exact; the way the toy is used; the age of the person most likely to play with it (for many toys and games it will be any age); and where the toy is available at present. (Have students list “toy store,” or “discount store,” rather than mentioning specific store names.)

4. **Have students create a project** showing their toys and games. They can make hand-drawn illustrations, construct models or present live demonstrations. Make it clear—in a note home to parents if necessary—that students are not to purchase anything to fulfill this assignment.
5. **Follow up with a class discussion** allowing students to tell about their favorite toys or games—and talk about why these are their favorites.

**Source:** Gary Hopkins, “History of Toys and Games,” Education World, [www.education-world.com/a\\_lesson/03/lp327-01.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/03/lp327-01.shtml).

Differentiated Instruction

## Raise expectations to challenge all students



Some teachers think the main benefit of differentiated instruction is the ability to help low-performing students. But high achievers can also benefit from raised expectations. Here are three ways to challenge more students to higher levels:

1. **Provide support.** It’s not enough to give students a challenging task and say, “Good luck.” You need to give students the tools they need to be successful. Some students may need several opportunities to learn higher-level content. That might mean making an audio recording of the material so some students could listen to it while reading.
2. **Ask open-ended questions.** Instead of always asking a question that requires a single, simple answer, try posing some questions that ask students to think. Instead of asking, “Who is the President?” you could ask, “What do you think would make a person a good President?”
3. **Use grading rubrics.** Students will usually rise to your level of expectation. If you show them clearly what you expect, you are much more likely to get it. You might try one teacher’s grading scale—*Outstanding*, *Great* and *Not There Yet*. Students who receive this last grade will have a chance to try again to meet a high standard.

**Source:** Barbara R. Blackburn, *Classroom Instruction from A to Z*, ISBN: 1-596-67038-X (Eye on Education, 1-888-299-5350, [www.eyeoneducation.com](http://www.eyeoneducation.com)).

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## Setting High Expectations

### Convey this belief— all students can learn



As a teacher, one of your key beliefs is that all students can learn. It may sound like a tired cliché, but it's actually a solid truth—your students cannot be successful if you fail to believe in them and your ability to teach them. All students may not be able to earn straight A's, but they *can* learn. To put your belief into practice:

- **Provide explicit expectations** and instructions. Say, "I expect you to learn this concept, and you *can* learn it. These are the steps you need to take."
- **Share your expectations** with parents and colleagues.
- **Be flexible.** Realize that students will learn in different styles and at different paces, but do not abandon your conviction that they *will* learn.
- **Give students and parents** regular updates and feedback on how they are doing in meeting your explicit expectations.
- **Encourage students** at all stages. Always notice effort, not just achievement.

**Source:** David A. Goslin, *Engaging Minds: Motivation & Learning in America's Schools*, ISBN: 0-8108-4713-2 (R & L Education, 1-800-462-6420, [www.rowmaneducation.com](http://www.rowmaneducation.com)).

## Working Together: Part Three of a Three-Part Series

### Maintain a cooperative approach to discipline



Research shows that when discipline is consistent, students will exhibit better behavior—thus creating a stronger learning environment.

When students receive appropriate consequences some of the time, but can get away with inappropriate behavior at other times, or when one adult says one thing and the next adult says another, this creates confusion. Also, by the time they are in the upper elementary grades, many students will have learned to "work the system" quite effectively and will pit one adult against another at any opportunity.

The way to guard against this, of course, is for you and your colleagues to maintain a cooperative approach to student behavior.

Working together:

- **Follow the school-wide discipline** plan to the letter. Post rules in your classroom and encourage your colleagues to do the same.

- **Meet as a team to brainstorm** the behaviors you expect. Even with a school-wide plan, the teachers on your team may want to supplement the plan with an approach that could be appropriate for your own students. Discuss ways to elicit desired behaviors from children. Also discuss consequences and rewards.
- **Communicate the plan clearly** to your students. Emphasize how much you need their help and how important it is. Students want their peers to be held to the same high expectations. So let them know the plan exists—not just in your classroom but in all the classrooms on the team.
- **Share your ideas** with your school administration and ask for support.

**Source:** Elizabeth Shellard et al., *Effective Classroom Management to Support Student Learning*, ISBN: 1-931762-34-1 (Educational Research Service, 1-800-791-9308, [www.ers.org](http://www.ers.org)).

## Teaching Tips

### Chat-Check-Change helps students share ideas



Your whole-class discussions may be more lively if students have a chance to try out their ideas first. Chat-Check-Change is a fun way to get them up, moving and thinking about a subject.

Here's how to put it to work:

1. **Have students form two** concentric circles, facing each other.
2. **Ask a question.** Then give the signal for students facing each other to talk about the issue or question. Give them 90 seconds to chat and check in with ideas.
3. **Say, "Change."** Have the students in the inside circle walk clockwise while the outer circle moves around counter-clockwise.

4. **Give another signal** for students to stop and face their new partners. Ask the same question and have students chat and check ideas with a new classmate.
5. **Repeat once more.** Then have students take their seats to share what they discussed.

Use Chat-Check-Change to introduce a topic or for a quick review. Students will enjoy the chance to share their thoughts. Even shy students may take part in a class discussion after this warm-up.

**Source:** Robert Algozzine, *Strategies and Tactics for Effective Instruction*, ISBN: 1-570-35119-8 (Sopris West Publishing, 1-800-547-6747, [www.sopriswest.com](http://www.sopriswest.com)).

## Keeping Students on Task

### Use four P's to make transitions smoother



Moving students from one activity to another can be the time when your schedule comes apart. But there are ways to help your students make transitions that are smooth and organized so you can make the most of every teaching minute. Here are some steps that will help. Try these four P's:

- 1. Plan**—Plan the steps involved. Do students need to put away materials? Do they need to take anything out from their desks? Break these tasks down into simple, small steps.
- 2. Prepare**—Prepare your students before a transition occurs. Write your schedule on the board. Then give students a warning: “We have five more minutes before it’s time to go to lunch.” Give an extra,

quiet warning to students who find transitions especially challenging (for example, students with attention difficulties).

- 3. Practice**—Let students “rehearse” their transitions. “Let’s see how quickly we can put our math books away and get out our science notebooks.” Develop signals to get students’ attention. For example, turning out the light could mean, “Freeze and listen.”
- 4. Praise**—Give specific praise each time students make a smooth transition. “Yesterday, it took you two minutes to line up. Today, you cut 30 seconds off that time.”

**Source:** Kristen Nelson and Kim Bailey, *Starting Strong: Surviving and Thriving as a New Teacher*, ISBN: 1-575-17897-4 (Corwin Press, a Sage Publications Company, 1-800-233-9936, [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com)).

## Resources



Reading aloud helps children learn to love books. A new website, created by the Screen Actors Guild, uses streaming video to showcase actors reading great children’s books. Students can hear Elijah Wood read Satoshi Kitamura’s *Me and My Cat* or Lou Diamond Phillips read Chris Van Allsburg’s *The Polar Express*. You’ll find great activity ideas for classroom use, too. ([www.storylineonline.net](http://www.storylineonline.net).)



How can you tailor reading activities for each child? Diane Haager’s book *Interventions for Reading Success* includes 75 easy-to-use activities complete with goals, materials, step-by-step directions and word lists. Many include take-home activities so parents can reinforce what students have practiced in school. Activities are research-based. All can help struggling students become skillful (and enthusiastic) readers. (ISBN: 1-557-66678-4, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1-800-638-3775, [www.brookespublishing.com](http://www.brookespublishing.com).)



National Geographic offers a wide range of materials for grades K–12. Whether you need downloadable maps (more than 1600) or standards-based lesson plans, National Geographic’s Xpeditions is a great resource. From mapping Mars to planning a backyard garden, this site will help you bring the world into your classroom. ([www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions).)

## Deserved Praise

### Think about encouragement, not praise



You may think that “praise” and “encouragement” are synonyms. But there is a subtle, yet very important, difference.

*Praise* is a judgment that comes from the outside. As a result, praise usually results in winners and losers. It can create a competitive climate. But perhaps the biggest problem with praise is that the students who need it most are often the least likely to receive it.

*Encouragement*, on the other hand, is given for effort or improvement and focuses on a student’s assets and strengths. It can also help motivate a student who is struggling.

You might praise a child by saying “Your picture is pretty.” But you would encourage a child by saying,

“You really used your imagination and such interesting colors in that picture.”

Praise teaches children to depend on the opinions of others, while encouragement focuses on their efforts and on their specific actions.

Here are some ways you can use encouragement to motivate all your students:

- **Focus on effort:** “You worked a long time on this project.”
- **Focus on specific strengths** of a project: “You used interesting details in this story.”
- **Express confidence:** “I know you can figure this out.”

**Source:** Jane Nelsen, *Positive Discipline A-Z*, ISBN: 978-0-307-34557-8 (Three Rivers Press, a division of Random House, 1-800-733-3000, [www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com)).

## Share an Idea?

Do you have an idea to improve student learning that should be in this newsletter?

Send your ideas to **Better Teaching**, Editorial Dept., P.O. Box 397, Fairfax Station, VA 22039, fax to 1-800-216-3667 or go to [www.teacher-institute.com/ideas/](http://www.teacher-institute.com/ideas/).

Full credit will be given with each article published. Materials sent cannot be returned.

## Focus n: Teaching Social Skills

### Discipline

## Prevention beats intervention



The best way to deal with student misbehavior is to avoid it in the first place. Your instructional plan can make a huge difference in the way students behave in your class. Here are some things to remember:

- **Write it out.** Any directions that involve more than three steps should be written out. If you give the same directions frequently, create an overhead transparency to save time. If you think writing things out takes too much time—well, how much time do you spend repeating instructions?
- **Work the room.** Spend as much time as you can walking around. The closer you are to students, the less likely they are to misbehave.
- **Don't let "off-the-mark" behavior or back talk interrupt instruction.** Try nonverbal responses. Move closer to the student. Or develop "The Look"—a teacher look that means business.

Keep your expectations realistic. Elementary school students can't sit still and be quiet for hours on end. Vary your activities. Plan time for students to be more active following a quiet period.

**Source:** Paula Rutherford, *Why Didn't I Learn This in College?* ISBN: 0-966-33361-6 (Just ASK Publications, 1-800-940-5434, [www.askeducation.com](http://www.askeducation.com)).

### Teaching Manners

## Practice basic etiquette with students



Teaching etiquette, the manners and social graces that contribute to a pleasant, civilized society, was once a natural job for the adults who nurtured or supervised a child. Today, teaching etiquette is an industry. Some parents pay for children to attend etiquette classes because children no longer routinely pick it up by watching and listening to the adults in their lives.

Be an exception. Make etiquette a priority in your classroom. Some ideas:

- **Have a "table manners lunch"** in the classroom. Have students wipe their desks before lunch and clear them afterward. Give them a stack of napkins to practice passing politely. Show them how to sit up straight as they eat, with napkins in their laps.

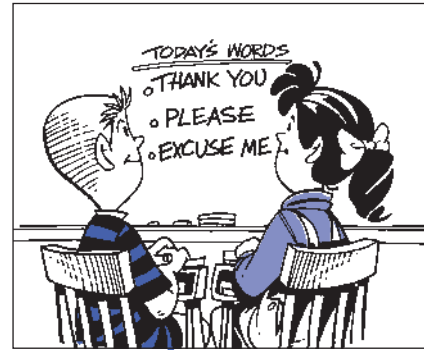


Illustration by Bob George

- **Insist on words like *please*, *thank you*, and *excuse me***—all the time.
- **Help students practice** introductions. Have them introduce an adult visitor to the class or a new student to a staff member.

**Source:** Darlene Mannix, *Social Skills Activities for Special Children*, ISBN: 0-87628-868-9 (Research Press, 1-800-519-2707, [www.researchpress.com](http://www.researchpress.com)).

### Listening Skills

## Model listening—no interruptions, please



You've probably given plenty of instruction on the important social skill of not talking when someone else is talking. After all, interrupting is simply rude.

But have you taught your students to wait a few seconds to truly consider what the speaker said before they reply? This important skill helps students learn to really listen and allows time for an appropriate response.

Model this practice for your students and encourage them to adopt it, too. Besides improving the skills listed above, pausing for a second or two before speaking can:

- **Promote more relevant communication.** The speaker's words have time to "sink in," so the reply is more likely to be on topic.
- **Encourage more students to participate.** Some need more time to gather their thoughts. The pressure of having to give an instant reply can intimidate them into silence.
- **Build self-esteem** for the speaker. Students will feel their contributions have value if they get a moment of undivided attention.

**Source:** Paula Denton, *The Power of Our Words: Teacher Language That Helps Children Learn*, ISBN: 978-1-892989-18-5 (Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc., 1-800-360-6332, [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)).