Practice guide for primary and secondary schools

Develop techniques and practices

Australian Education Research Organisation

Classroom management practice guide

Setting behaviour expectations for completing learning tasks

December 2023

Effective classroom management creates safe and supportive learning environments for all students. This practice guide is part of a suite of foundational resources for beginning teachers, teachers working in new environments, or experienced teachers who want to refine or refresh specific elements of their classroom management practice. They can be used to individually reflect on and refine one's own practice, or as shared resources to support mentoring and other collaborative and whole-school approaches to improving classroom management.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s guidance is based on a synthesis of the most rigorous and relevant research evidence and guidance on classroom management from a wide range of research experts and expert practitioners across Australia and internationally.

This practice guide will support you in setting behaviour expectations for your students when completing learning tasks, to create a safe learning environment and minimise disruption.

Students undertake learning tasks individually, in pairs, in small groups and as a whole class. It's important to set clear behaviour expectations for learning in each of these ways so all students know what is required of them and are better able to take responsibility for their behaviour.

Effectively setting behaviour expectations for completing learning tasks requires the following steps:

1. Gain all students' attention.
2. Clearly communicate the behaviour expectations for the learning task.
3. Model and practise the behaviour expectations.
4. Start the learning task.
5. Monitor and reinforce the behaviour expectations.

Effectively setting behaviour expectations for completing learning tasks requires several skills including acknowledgement and praise, circulation, clear communication, deliberately pausing, non-verbal correction, scanning and voice control.

Always interact with students with a calm tone, respect and politeness – for example, greeting students on first encounter and completing instructions with 'Thank you'. Positively frame communication, stating what students need to do rather than what they don't (that is, avoid using words like 'no' and 'don't'). This models respectful and polite interactions for students and creates a positive and supportive learning environment.

Effectively setting behaviour expectations for completing learning tasks

1. Gain all students' attention

Efficiently gaining all students' attention maximises instructional time and reduces the likelihood of students missing critical information.

Stand where all students can see you and, with an assertive voice, gain all students' attention:

1. Using a countdown, call and response or verbal prompt to indicate to students that they need to stop what they're doing, face you and listen in silence.
2. Pausing and scanning to ensure students are looking and listening.

3. Acknowledging students meeting behaviour expectations and praising students exceeding behaviour expectations specific to them.
4. Responding to behaviours not meeting expectations with a non-verbal correction such as a look and gesture, or a positively framed verbal correction such as a group reminder of expectations, and acknowledging students when they correct their behaviour.

2. Clearly communicate the behaviour expectations for the learning task

It's important that you plan and teach the behaviour expectations for learning tasks so students understand what's required of them. By having the same expectations each time, students will become familiar with your expectations and be better able to meet them.

Clearly communicate to all students the expectations for completing the learning task. This will include important instructions for the learning task, such as the volume at which you expect the students to be talking, how they are to interact with each other, how they are to move around the classroom if required, how long they have to complete the learning task and what they are to do if they need help. It's also important to communicate why these behaviour expectations are important – ultimately, so all students can focus on their learning in a safe and supportive environment.

Examples of different ways of learning and how you could communicate behaviour expectations include:

- **Independently** – 'For this activity, stay in your own seats, write in your own books and focus in silence so we can all really concentrate. Thank you.'
- **Pairs** – 'In pairs, talk to the person next to you and decide which picture matches each sentence. Use your quiet voice so only your partner can hear you. This will help everyone hear their partners. Thank you.'
- **Group** – 'In your groups, follow the instructions on the sheet. Listen when each person talks so that everyone has a chance to respond, and use a voice only your table can hear so that other groups can hear each other. Thank you.'
- **Whole class** – 'When I say your name, answer the question using a loud enough voice so that the whole class can hear. The rest of us are going to listen to you and think about what you're saying. If you have a question or something to add, please raise your hand so that we can all have our turn and hear each other. Thank you.'

3. Model and practise the behaviour expectations

Modelling and providing an opportunity for students to practise the behaviour expectations for learning tasks helps them to enact them and increases instructional time.

Demonstrate what the behaviour expectations look and sound like, such as using the appropriate volume for different learning tasks, listening and responding to other students, and moving around the classroom safely and quietly.

Check students understand the behaviour expectations – for example, '[Name], can you please remind everyone how we're going to do this activity so that we can all concentrate while we're working.'

Have students briefly practise the behaviour expectations – for example, 'Show me what working in pairs looks like and sounds like by discussing your favourite food'. Scan or circulate and acknowledge students demonstrating the expected behaviours to reinforce these. Respond to students not meeting the behaviour expectations with a non-verbal prompt or quick correction, such as 'Remember, [Name], we're listening to our group members and thinking about what they're saying'. Acknowledge students when they correct their behaviour.

Gain all students' attention and provide feedback on how they went meeting the behaviour expectations – for example, 'Thank you for demonstrating the expectations for working in pairs. Everyone used partner voices, took turns and listened to and thought about what their partner was saying before they responded'.

Continue to model and practise the behaviour expectations until all students can meet them.

Acknowledge students meeting behaviour expectations and praise students exceeding behaviour expectations specific to them. Respond to disengaged and disruptive behaviours, acknowledging students when they correct their behaviour.

4. Start the learning task

Having a distinct start to a learning task provides students with a clear moment for them to demonstrate the expected behaviours. This helps establish a clear sense of purpose and prevents disengagement that may occur during slow, unmonitored transitions.

From a position where all students can see you, deliberately pause and scan, provide a final reminder of the expectations, then prompt students to start the learning task – for example, 'Red group, please stand with your clipboard and pencil. Calmly and quietly move to your work area to begin, being aware of other group members moving too. [Pause.] Blue group, you may calmly and quietly move to your work area to begin'.

5. Monitor and reinforce the behaviour expectations

Consistently monitoring all students' behaviour demonstrates that you are aware of what is happening in your classroom, will provide support to students when needed and will reinforce behaviour expectations.

It's important to monitor all students while they're moving (if moving) and as soon as they start a learning task. Monitor all students while they're completing the learning task by regularly using a combination of pausing, scanning and circulating. Assist students when needed. Acknowledge students meeting behaviour expectations and praise students exceeding behaviour expectations specific to them. Respond to disengaged and disruptive behaviours, acknowledging students when they correct their behaviour.

If many students aren't demonstrating the expected behaviours, gain all students' attention and provide a whole class reminder, modelling and practising as required – for example, 'Three, pens down, two, facing this way, one, everyone listening. [Pause.] Thank you. I can hear some excellent conversations, but we are starting to move into group work noise level rather than partner noise level, making it difficult for others to hear. Please let me hear your partner voices again. [Pause to allow students to practise]. Thank you. Now continue at that noise level.'

Continue to scan and circulate throughout the learning task. Be mindful of your position when circulating, making sure you can always see the majority of students.

Rehearse then practise setting behaviour expectations for completing learning

Use the checklist for each step in the following section to identify your strengths and prioritise the step you will focus on first for rehearsal and practice. Focus on one step at a time until you can confidently demonstrate each item on the checklist.

Begin by scripting and rehearsing without students present. Consider filming your rehearsal and using the relevant checklist to review the recording yourself or with a colleague.

Then practise with students present. Record and review your practice alone or with a colleague using the relevant checklist, making sure to follow school or employer policies regarding recording students.

Invite a colleague to observe you setting behaviour expectations for completing learning tasks in action. Ask them to use the checklists to provide feedback on what went well and to suggest one area for further improvement.

1. Gain all students' attention

Rehearse, then practise:

- ☐ gaining all students' attention by using your countdown, call and response, or visual cue or gesture
- ☐ deliberately pausing
- ☐ scanning all students
- ☐ acknowledging students meeting behaviour expectations and praising students exceeding behaviour expectations specific to them
- ☐ responding to disengaged or disruptive behaviours that might occur and acknowledging students when they correct their behaviour.

2. Clearly communicate the behaviour expectations for the learning task

Consider the different ways of completing learning tasks:

- individually
- pairs
- group
- whole class.

List your behaviour expectations for each of these ways of completing learning tasks:

- Where should students be?
- How should they move to get there?
- Who should they be working with?
- What should they be doing?
- How should they be listening to and considering what others are saying?
- How should they be speaking, including their volume, and how are they to interact with each other?
- How long do they have?

Script, rehearse, then practise clearly communicating these expectations:

- ☐ Use as few words as possible while maintaining clarity.
- ☐ Break instructions down:
  - into a small number of manageable steps
  - in a sequential order
  - so they're actionable for students.
- ☐ Deliberately pause and scan to ensure students understand and are following the instructions.

3. Model and practise the behaviour expectations

Script, rehearse, then practise:

- ☐ demonstrating what the expected behaviours look and sound like
- ☐ checking for understanding
- ☐ correcting misunderstandings
- ☐ providing opportunities for students to practise demonstrating the expected behaviours
- ☐ acknowledging students meeting behaviour expectations and praising students exceeding behaviour expectations specific to them
- ☐ responding to disengaged or disruptive behaviours, acknowledging students when they correct their behaviour.

4. Start the learning task

Script and rehearse how you'll prompt students to start learning tasks, keeping instructions simple and brief. Use the same prompt every time students start a learning task, such as a verbal cue or countdown.

5. Monitor and reinforce the behaviour expectations

Rehearse, then practise:

- ☐ a strategic position where you can see all students
- ☐ deliberately pausing in your strategic position
- ☐ scanning combined with deliberately pausing
- ☐ circulating the classroom to:
  - support students requiring clarification of an instruction or extra assistance
  - acknowledge students meeting behaviour expectations
  - praise students exceeding expectations specific to them
  - respond to disengaged and disruptive behaviours, acknowledging students when they correct their behaviour.

Script, rehearse, then practise gaining all students' attention and re-setting behaviour expectations when needed.

Questions for reflection

When you've refined and combined each of the steps for setting behaviour expectations for completing learning tasks, consider the following questions:

- What impact is clearly communicating your expectations for completing learning tasks having on students during activities? How can you tell?
- What impact does modelling and practising behaviour expectations for completing learning tasks have on your students? Can you improve this further to support students in demonstrating the expected behaviours?
- What other skills and practices might you need to refine to support setting behaviour expectations for completing learning tasks?

Regularly revise setting behaviour expectations for completing learning tasks

Schedule points in the year to revise this practice for yourself and your students.

For more practical guidance

AERO has developed a suite of resources to support teachers and school leaders to refine or refresh their foundational practices in creating safe and supportive learning environments through effective classroom management. You can read the Classroom Management Resources: User Guide for an overview of these resources and suggestions for their use.

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