



# Classroom Management With Exceptional Learners

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Managing a classroom effectively is a crucial skill teachers need to maximize academic achievement, enhance student social competence, promote positive classroom climate, and enable supports for students with exceptional needs. In addition, student behavior has a direct effect on teachers' job satisfaction, and an inability to manage students' behavior is likely a key factor in our nation's high turnover rate among teachers (e.g., Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Landers, Alter, & Servilio, 2008; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Many general and special educators do not receive formal and direct preparation in the use of effective classroom management practices (Freeman, Simonsen, Briere, & MacSuga-Gage, 2014; Oliver & Reschly, 2007, 2010). New special education teachers may feel unprepared or underprepared to manage the behavior of a diverse caseload of students across a variety of settings, and they may be overwhelmed if students display unusually challenging behavior (Stough, Montague, Landmark, & Williams-Diehm, 2015). Without adequate preservice preparation, new special education teachers may be left to navigate classroom management on their own, or they may model their practices after what they see happening in other classrooms where teachers may not be modeling evidence-based practices.

First, we want to emphasize that effective and engaging instruction is the cornerstone for any well-managed classroom. Even the best behavior support practices will not lead to academic achievement if the academic instruction is ineffective (Oliver & Reschly, 2007). Research findings indicate that increasing rates of effective instruction may decrease rates of inappropriate behavior, especially for students with disabilities (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). Effective instruction for students with disabilities should incorporate individualized instructional differentiation and use assessment data to inform instruction (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). Specific teacher practices associated with improved student behavior include high rates of opportunities to respond, direct

instruction, and thoughtful use of technology, such as computer-assisted instruction (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008; Stronge et al., 2011). However, effective instruction cannot occur if teachers struggle with managing their classrooms. Similarly, effective classroom management cannot occur if effective and engaging instruction is not being delivered. Quality teaching and appropriate student behavior are highly correlated, and both are related to teachers' job satisfaction and feelings of self-efficacy (e.g., Klassen & Chiu, 2010). In short, good teaching is one of the best behavior management tools.

Fortunately, evidence-based classroom management practices are

### **Classwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: A Classroom Management Framework**

Specific evidence-based practices are intended to be implemented as part of an overall classroom management system based on PBIS. PBIS was originally a framework for delivering behavioral support at the individual student level (i.e., students with special needs; Carr et al., 2002), and during the past 2 decades, PBIS has become a framework for providing behavioral support to all students at the schoolwide level (i.e., SWPBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Language about PBIS appears in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The

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available to support educators' ability to foster positive classroom climates and address the academic and behavior needs of all students, including those with special education needs (Lewis, Hudson, Richter, & Johnson, 2004; Simonsen et al., 2008). In addition to effective instruction, empirically supported classroom management practices, if implemented correctly and consistently, can increase the likelihood of improved student behavior and academic outcomes. Among these, two key strategies can enable teachers to maximize success of their students and promote desired behaviors: (a) establishing and teaching routines and expectations and (b) providing specific feedback. When coupled with effective instruction and delivered as part of a classwide system of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), these two practices help teachers establish environments that maximize the impact of their academic instruction and contribute to more positive classroom climates.

law states that PBIS must be considered when developing behavior intervention plans for students with disabilities (20 U.S.C. §1414[d][3][B][i]) and that all preservice and in-service teachers should receive training in PBIS (Turnbull, Wilcox, Turnbull, Sailor, & Wickham, 2001).

Recently, a *classwide PBIS framework* has emerged (e.g., Simonsen & Myers, 2015), providing teachers with a proactive, systematic way to approach classroom management. A classwide PBIS system incorporates key PBIS elements (e.g., outcome oriented, data driven, guided by principles of applied behavioral analysis; Carr et al., 2002) and other evidence-based practices (e.g., actively engaging students, maximizing structure; Simonsen et al., 2008). PBIS-based classroom management systems are based on two primary practices: (a) establishing and teaching routines and expectations and (b) providing behavior-specific praise and error corrections. To support all teachers, especially new special educators, in implementing these practices and other evidence-based



strategies, in this article we discuss these practices and identify reliable resources—including examples of these practices and what they “look like” in the classroom.

### Practice 1: Establishing and Teaching Routines and Expectations

Effective teachers provide explicit examples, opportunities for practice, and feedback during instruction. Teachers do not assume that students will automatically know how to line up numbers when doing double-digit addition; specify the main idea of a paragraph or story; apply a problem-solving logic to a political debate; or pronounce *ough* correctly in the words *rough*, *through*, and *thorough*. The same logic applies to social-behavioral skills. Teachers, including special educators, must not assume that students know how to ask for assistance, turn in assignments and homework, respond to teasing, transition from one activity to another, work independently, or follow other classroom routines and behavioral

expectations without being explicitly taught what these behaviors look like and sound like. As with academics, students with disabilities may require additional, remedial, or differentiated instruction to meet the expectations for social behaviors.

Good classroom management begins by establishing and teaching routines to ensure all students are aware of and able to identify what is expected in the classroom. All students—including students with disabilities—perform better when they understand exactly what is expected of them, academically and behaviorally (Evans & Weiss, 2014; Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2015; Park & Lynch, 2014). In particular, students with disabilities benefit from direct, explicit instruction in expected behaviors (e.g., Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001). Because routines differ from teacher to teacher, classroom to classroom, grade to grade, and year to year, teachers must ensure all routines are taught directly and practiced frequently to help students link routines to the required contexts or situations (Simonsen & Myers, 2015).

If teachers do not teach rules explicitly, students may learn rules from other sources, including peers, prior experience, or trial and error—all of which are unlikely to result in a student’s reliable performance of desired rule-following behaviors.

An efficient way to organize the teaching of classroom expectations is by using a matrix that has three distinct features: (a) expectations (e.g., “respect”), (b) routines (e.g., “teacher or student speaking”), and (c) measurable behavior examples (e.g., “eyes on speaker”). Behavior matrices have been used effectively at the schoolwide level, which includes students with and without disabilities (Lynass, Tsai, Richman, & Cheney, 2012; Simonsen et al., 2012). Figure 1 is example of a classroom matrix, where routines (top row) are defined within the context of expectations (left column) and behaviors are observable, measurable, and positively stated.

The first feature of the classroom matrix is *expectations*. Classroom and instructional routines can be effectively and efficiently taught by aligning with and using previously established

Figure 1. Example of classroom behavior matrix

Expectations	Classroom routines				
	Independent work	Group work	Tests and quizzes	Arrival	Dismissal
Be respectful	Remain quiet. Raise hand to ask a question.	Keep eyes on the person who is speaking. Take turns during discussions.	Be quiet during the test. Read quietly if finished early.	Move to seat quickly and quietly. Greet teacher as you enter room.	Line up quickly and quietly. Close locker and desk quietly.
Be responsible	Keep eyes on own paper. Read all directions.	Complete all assigned tasks. Turn in assignment on time.	Keep eyes on own paper. Use scrap paper.	Start the “do now” as soon as you sit. Put all belongings in locker.	Write down all homework assignments. Take all necessary materials.
Be ready	Check writing utensils before assignment. Know how long you may work on assignment.	Get into your group quickly. Keep volume as low as possible.	Study and ask questions prior to test. Begin working immediately.	Have all materials that you need for the day. Review schedule written on board.	Look around to make sure you have everything. Push chair under desk.



schoolwide expectations, if they exist. For example, many schools have specified three to five expectations that are typically taught and encouraged across schoolwide nonclassroom settings (e.g., assemblies, hallways, cafeterias, dances, playgrounds, parking lots). Examples include "Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible" and "Respect Others, Respect Ourselves, Respect Environment." If the school does not have schoolwide expectations, the teacher can create his or her own for the classroom. Like schoolwide expectations, classroom expectations are specified broadly; therefore, these expectations must be linked to (a) specific and observable behaviors and (b) relevant classroom routines where those behavioral examples are expected.

likely to use the map as a visual prompt as they guide students through activities (i.e., practice) that involve locating states on a blank map or identifying different regions of the country. Teachers provide specific feedback as students complete practice activities (e.g., "Yes, Vermont is part of New England" or "You're close, but that's not Kansas. Look more toward the center of the country"). The map complements the lessons.

This same explicit instructional approach can be applied to the expectations, routines, and behaviors outlined in the matrix. That is, social and behavior skills can be taught just as academic skills using a basic model-lead-test format, that is, "I do," "We do," and "You do." During this instruction, examples and non-

Students do not always learn academic skills the first time and may require prompting to complete academic tasks correctly. In fact, many classrooms display visual academic prompts prominently and permanently (e.g., number lines, word walls), and teachers frequently provide verbal reminders (e.g., "Remember your paragraph-reading strategy when completing the assigned reading," "Wear your eye protection when conducting experiments"). The same is true for behavior and routine skills. Following the direct teaching of any behavioral expectation, reminders or prompts to engage in the newly learned behaviors, active supervision of students in situations where these behaviors are expected, and specific feedback to reinforce instances of the behavior (and correct behavioral errors if they occur) increase the likelihood that students will demonstrate the desired behaviors reliably and fluently. Research has consistently indicated that using prompts to promote skill acquisition in students with disabilities has been an effective practice (e.g., Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Graves, Collins, Schuster, & Kleinert, 2005).

Prompting for appropriate social behavior may take a variety of forms, including visual (e.g., posters of expectations, photos of students engaging in behavior that meets expectations, the classroom matrix), verbal (e.g., "Before we line up, who can tell me what it looks like to be responsible while leaving the classroom?" or "Remember, when you get into your groups, be respectful of everyone by taking turns and listening to whomever is speaking"), and modeling ("Bernie, before we begin today, please show us a respectful way to get my attention when I'm teaching"). While students are executing the routines, teachers actively supervise students by walking around, scanning the classroom, and providing specific feedback (DePry & Sugai, 2002). Providing specific feedback is a critical and complementary component of establishing procedures and routines for all learners, including those with special needs.

## **The provision of specific feedback is a critical and complementary component of establishing procedures and routines for all learners.**

Classroom routines create the embedded structure of the classroom; these routines provide guidelines for what should be done when students arrive in the classroom, what should be done when leaving the classroom, and everything in between. Routines include how to ask for assistance, how to take care of personal hygiene needs, how to participate in group work, and how to complete independent seat work. By explicitly teaching routines to students, teachers can (a) set students up for success, (b) decrease the possibility of behavior errors, and (c) reduce the amount of time spent reminding students about the routines on a daily basis.

Once the matrix is complete, teachers use the matrix as a resource for directly and actively teaching these expectations and behaviors to their students. The matrix alone will not increase students' appropriate behavior. After all, teachers do not hang a map of the United States on the wall and hope that students learn the different states; teachers are more

examples assist students in discriminating between expected and inappropriate behavior for a given setting and also help students discriminate between what the behavior does and does not look like. For example, raising your hand quietly and high enough over your head to be seen by the teacher is an example of the expected way to ask for assistance; waving your hand and shouting, "Ooh, ooh," is a non-example.

One of the most important aspects of teaching expected behaviors involves providing examples of exactly what the behaviors look like for a given routine; allowing students opportunities to practice the expected behaviors when the routine is required; and providing specific feedback on students' use of these behaviors by restating what the student does accurately, highlighting aspects that could be more accurate, and positively reinforcing effort—just like the teacher would do when teaching an academic skill. An abbreviated example of a behavioral expectation lesson plan is provided in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Example of lesson plan for expected behavior**

Behavior Expectation Lesson Plan	
<b>Lesson focus:</b> Demonstrating respect (expectation) during tests and quizzes (routine).	
<b>Teaching objective:</b> Following instruction, students will demonstrate respect (expectation) during tests and quizzes (routine) by being quiet during the test and reading quietly if finished early (behaviors).	
<b>Lesson materials:</b> For the lesson, you will need a mock test to give to all students, as well as a desk and chair at the front of the room for modeling examples and non-examples of the behavior.	
Teaching examples	
<b>Positive examples:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>During a test, student sits quietly with her feet on the floor and eyes on her paper, writing silently and staying still in her seat.</li> <li>Student puts his quiz at corner of her desk, reaches into his bag quietly, removes a book, and reads until his peers are finished.</li> </ul>	<b>Negative examples:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>During a test, student yells out, "I need help with Number 5."</li> <li>Student gets out of seat to bring the quiz to the teacher and asks to use the computer.</li> </ul>
Lesson activities	
<b>Model:</b> Ask students what it looks like to be respectful during a test or quiz. Write their answers on the board, and shape (if necessary) toward desired behaviors as listed above. Then, sit at the desk in front of the room and model several examples of what respect during a test or quiz looks like. Finally, model several examples and non-examples of being respectful during a test or quiz and have students identify which is which, and how the non-examples don't meet the expectations.	
<b>Lead:</b> Give students a short mock test on something they enjoy (e.g., a TV show or sport). Tell them that you want them to engage in respectful behaviors while completing the test. While they complete the test, walk around the room and give students feedback on their behavior, acknowledging those that are engaging in the desired behaviors and providing corrective feedback (and reteaching, if necessary) to those who are not. When everyone is done, have a discussion about the group's performance and any skills that still need to be addressed.	
<b>Test:</b> Schedule a quiz for the following day on a topic the students have been studying. Before the quiz, prompt students by saying, "Remember what it looks like to be respectful during a test or quiz" and if you like, have them give you some examples. During the quiz, observe students' behavior to determine if they are meeting the expectations.	
Follow-up activities	
<b>Procedures to prompt:</b> Before any test or quiz, remind students what it looks like to be respectful during a test or quiz. Consider including visual prompts on the test or quiz (e.g., written reminder, picture).	
<b>Procedures to reinforce:</b> Praise students for appropriate behavior with written feedback on the test or quiz, or consider adding an extra point to the test or quiz if student meets behavioral expectation.	
<b>Procedures to correct behavioral errors:</b> If a behavioral error occurs during the test or quiz, approach the student's desk and quietly remind her of the expectation. If the behavior continues or more than a few students make behavioral errors, reteach the content and provide additional opportunities for practice and feedback.	

## Practice 2: Providing Behavior-Specific Praise and Error Corrections

When students perform an academic task correctly, teachers acknowledge by saying something like "Yes, that's right" or giving another type of feedback (e.g., written comments on a paper, thumbs-up). When a teacher asks a student what 5 plus 6 equals and the student answers, "11," an effective teacher acknowledges the correct academic response rather than

moving to the next problem without giving information. Similarly, when a student makes an academic error, teachers acknowledge the error by signaling that an error has occurred and provide specific error corrections or suggestions about how to complete the task correctly. For instance, if a teacher asks a student what 5 plus 6 equals and the student says, "56," the teacher may say something like, "Remember, we're adding. Try again?" or "Let me see if I can help you figure that out." Again, effective teachers

consistently provide guided opportunities and informative feedback. All students, especially students with special needs, require explicit feedback to acquire and gain fluency with new academic skills and avoid repeated academic errors.

However, for social behavior errors, teachers often provide limited feedback beyond a reprimand (e.g., a "no," "stop," or "don't" statement; Simonsen & Myers, 2015). Effective teaching includes providing specific, positive praise statements when student



behavior meets expectations and specific error corrections when student behavior does not meet expectations (OSEP, 2015). Quality praise statements and error corrections incorporate expectation-based language (e.g., “respect” or “responsible”), occur contingently after the behavior, specifically state the desired or undesired behavior, and include information about the context in which the behavior occurred. An example of behavior-specific praise would be “Jeff, during the small group activity [context], I saw you help Cleo get the lab equipment set up for the experiment [expected behavior]. I appreciate your being responsible and respectful of others [classroom and schoolwide expectation].” An example of a specific error correction would be “Simon, when you arrived in the classroom [context], I saw you run to your seat and take out your phone [behavior that occurred] rather than sitting quietly and beginning the assignment [expected behavior]. Please show me what it looks like to be responsible when you arrive in the classroom.” When Simon does sit quietly at his desk on arrival, the teacher acknowledges that he has met the expectation (e.g., “Simon, that’s exactly what it looks like to be responsible when you arrive. Thank you”).

Behavior-specific praise for appropriate behaviors has long been associated with increases in appropriate student behavior for students with disabilities (e.g., Lewis et al., 2004) and students without disabilities (e.g., Allday et al., 2012; Simonsen et al., 2008). Benefits of behavior-specific praise delivered verbally include (a) direct and personalized attention to the student, (b) detailed information to the student about what behavior resulted in the praise statement, and (c) that all nearby students incidentally experience and learn about the behavior-praise relationship. If students find verbal praise aversive (e.g., students may dislike adult attention), teachers can deliver the behavior-specific praise privately or in a written format. Some examples of behavior-specific praise for

desired behaviors in a classroom where the expectations are “Respect, Responsibility, and Safety” are as follows:

- When Gavin picks up a pen that another student drops, the special education teacher says, “Gavin, picking up Victoria’s pen was respectful of her belongings, and getting it off the floor increases the safety of our classroom. Thank you.”
- When Maddy (who does not find attention reinforcing) completes her assignment quietly and takes out a book to read while others finish, her teacher writes, “Reading quietly shows that you are responsible and is respectful of your classmates. Well done!” on a sticky note and discreetly places the note on Maddy’s desk.
- When Teddy walks (instead of runs) when entering the classroom, the teacher says, “Thank you for walking safely!”

Specific error correction can decrease the likelihood of inappropriate behavior and increase the likelihood of appropriate behavior for all students, including those with disabilities (e.g., Cortez & Malian, 2013). Rather than a “no,” “stop,” or “don’t” statement that only tells the student what not to do (e.g., “Stop talking”), teachers (a) focus on providing specific error corrections that signal the error occurrence, (b) state the correct or desired behavior (e.g., “You are expected to listen during whole-class instruction”), (c) reinforce correct aspects of the response, and (d) prompt or reteach (as indicated) the expected behavior.

- When Quincy calls out an answer during a review drill, the teacher says, “Quincy, remember that being respectful looks like raising your hand and waiting for me to call on you. Can you show me what that looks like?” When Quincy raises his hand, the teacher says, “That’s exactly right. Now, what did you want to contribute?”
- When Reiko is frustrated during a writing lesson and puts her head

down, the special education teacher goes to Reiko’s desk and says quietly, “Reiko, putting your head down is not respectful or responsible during independent work. Remember, if you need help or you need to ask me to take a break, you should raise your hand and ask for help. Now, can you lift your head and show me what respectful behavior looks like?” When Reiko lifts her head and raises her hand, the teacher says, “That’s what being respectful looks like. Now, how can I help you?”

In both of these examples, the teachers turn a potentially negative interaction into an interaction that (a) sets the student up for success and (b) provides practice and feedback on the desired behavior. Of course, just as all academic errors are not remediated by a simple error correction, not all behavior errors are remediated by a simple specific error correction. Students with disabilities may require more intensive corrections or reteaching for behavioral errors, such as instruction that is more intensive (e.g., one to one), specialized (e.g., more examples and prompting), frequent (e.g., immediate and daily vs. weekly), and informative (e.g., every occurrence and direct). Approaching behavioral errors as they approach academic errors keeps teachers focused on teaching and providing feedback rather than providing aversive consequences that do not teach students what we want them to do. Teachers cannot assume that traditional consequences for inappropriate behavior (e.g., general verbal reprimands, removal from class) result in students, especially students with disabilities, learning expected behaviors; some students may require direct instruction and more frequent and intense practice with new academic and social behaviors.

### **Reliable Resource 1: Supporting and Responding to Student Behavior**

OSEP developed *Supporting and Responding to Behavior: Evidence-Based Classroom Strategies for Teachers* (2015)



in partnership with the National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports ([www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)). In this document, empirically supported classroom management practices are summarized, and a decision-making guide is included to support teachers in implementing these practices. This document also includes a self-assessment for teachers to evaluate their implementation of these practices. Individual practices are described in tables that include the definition of the practice, elementary- and secondary-level examples, suggestions to avoid common mistakes, and brief summaries of empirical support and links to additional resources (e.g., videos or books). In addition, this document also identifies best practices for responding to different types and intensities of behaviors in the classroom and concludes with scenarios from one elementary and one high school that illustrate how the practices are used in the classroom.

### Reliable Resource 2: Missouri Classroom PBIS Modules

To provide further guidance about what practices “look like,” members of the Missouri PBIS leadership team developed modules on essential, empirically supported classroom management practices (Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support, n.d.). These tools include scripted PowerPoint presentations, associated handouts and activities, video modules, and associated evaluation resources (e.g., a walk-through assessment) to support teachers’ implementation of key classroom management practices.

### Reliable Resource 3: Videos That Model Effective Use of Practices

In addition to reading about the practices and viewing training materials, one of the best ways to learn how to implement these practices is to see them in action. Scott (2016) and others at the University of Louisville recorded a series of video vignettes to illustrate implementation of

crucial behavioral and instructional support practices across age and grade levels (University of Louisville, n.d.). As a former special educator, Scott highlights practices that work across general and special education, and he uses these videos to show implementation examples across a range of students.

### Final Thoughts

In this article, we have provided descriptions and examples of empirically supported practices that can be implemented by general and special education teachers and are associated with positive student behavior. These practices should be implemented as part of a comprehensive system of classwide PBIS. In addition, we identified resources to support teachers as they build fluency with these practices. Although these practices and resources are beneficial to all students, they also will have a significant positive impact on the success of students with disabilities.

In closing, we encourage teachers to approach teaching behavior as they do the teaching of academics. Effective teachers begin by establishing expectations about what the outcome (i.e., eventual desired academic or social behavior or routine) looks like, providing explicit instruction in the routines and expectations related to those behaviors, and providing specific and contingent feedback to (a) signal and correct or reteach behavior errors, (b) acknowledge behavior that nearly or fully meets expectations, and (c) strengthen the link between the behavior occurrence and the setting in which it is required. Students need differential support to succeed academically, and they may need differential support to succeed behaviorally. Academic and behavior success for all students, including those with special needs, is more likely if teachers provide a conceptually solid, evidence-based foundation of proactive classroom management (i.e., classwide PBIS) that incorporates the key practices discussed above.

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