

TEACHING RULES AND EXPECTATIONS

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Most preschool classrooms have a set of rules that signify the behaviors teachers want the children to demonstrate such as use your walking feet, share, take turns, use inside voices. There are many variations, but rules are stated as the positive behaviors the teacher is trying to teach the children in order to develop a positive classroom climate and to promote learning for all children. With Teaching Pyramid, teachers are encouraged to include a set of expectations for children that are linked to the rules.

Expectations are character traits such as “We are Safe,” “We are Kind,” and “We are Friendly.” By connecting the rule that you ask them to follow e.g., walking feet with the reason for that rule e.g., because we are *safe* in the classroom, the children have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the rules. Knowing both the “what,” or the rule, as well as the “why,” or the expectation, gives children a more information to promote their learning and hopefully application of such behaviors in the classroom. What’s more, rules combined with expectations may become a tool for helping children learn about themselves and how their behavior impacts both themselves and others, rather than just a tool to manage the classroom. When teachers acknowledge children’s efforts to follow the rules and connect these efforts to the expectations, children hear “You are sharing your toys, Blanca, you are being friendly.” In this way, the teacher is focusing on child development, not classroom management.

The rules might be thought of as “what” desirable behavior children are asked to do and the expectations as “why” they are asked to do it. Most classrooms have three to four broad expectations such as “We are Friendly, We are Safe, and We are Respectful” with various rules that serve as examples of how to demonstrate each of those expectations.

TEACHING EXPECTATIONS

To teach expectations, consider the Teaching Pyramid Framework’s three tiers: **Promotion, Prevention, and Intervention.**

1. To **promote** understanding of the purpose and meaning of rules and expectations, start

by inviting children to create their classroom rules together with the teachers, providing them with an opportunity to share their opinions and express their ideas alongside their peers. Planning in this way also **promotes** children’s social and emotional development in that they gain a sense of their role in the classroom and build connection to others in their classroom community. Consider the Benjamin Franklin quote: “Tell me and I forget; teach me and I might remember; *involve* me and I will learn.”

To **promote** children’s understanding of the connection between rules and expectations, involve the children by asking, “What can you do to be *safe* in the classroom? *Friendly? Respectful?*” Give children the opportunity to share their ideas for expectation examples, or rules, and talk amongst themselves about why these rules are important. Try using puppets to help children act out the expectation examples (rules) and connect them to the expectations so children can learn through rehearsal. Involving children in developing the rules and expectations in this fun and playful way helps **prevent** challenging behaviors because children begin to understand what the rules and expectations are, how to follow them, and why they do so!

2. Once the expectations and the rules are agreed upon, create a visual display that is put at the children’s eye level. The visual display features pictures of the children demonstrating the expectation examples (or rules) to **promote** children’s understanding of the connection between the two. It’s suggested that pictures of the expectation examples are removable (put on velcro or in a plastic sleeve) so they can be rotated periodically with new pictures to maintain the children’s interest in the visual display. Throughout the day, teachers can **promote** the children’s learning of the expectations and rules by engaging them in conversations about the display and show the families how to use it as well.
3. As an **intervention**, teachers can go to the display with a child who is having trouble

following a rule or expectation and engage his or her “thinking brain” by asking questions about the meaning of the pictures or encouraging the child to think of what they can do to meet the expectation. Seeing themselves and/or their peers demonstrating examples of the expectations in a visual display makes it clear that the behaviors are connected to their own experiences and, therefore, may motivate children to replicate those behaviors (see the yellow tab called Visual Strategies in the Teaching Pyramid binder for examples of expectations visual displays from classrooms).

An additional tip: if you have one child who is having a difficult time learning the behaviors associated with a particular expectation, capture a photo of that child demonstrating an example of that expectation and include the picture on the visual display. This can help **prevent** challenging behavior by providing the child with a visual cue that shows how he or she is a safe, respectful, or friendly person. Or, create an individual expectations and rules display for that child.

- Perhaps the most effective way to **promote** the learning of expectations is through PDA Plus. PDA Plus is positive, descriptive, acknowledgement that includes linking the child’s behavior to positive outcomes: feeling states, impact on others, or the expectations/character traits. As children engage in play throughout the classroom, scan for opportunities to “catch them” meeting the expectations and then give them PDA Plus for their efforts, such as, “You all are sharing your crayons. You are being respectful,” or “Raymond is giving Alaina the milk. He’s being friendly.”

Two key points to remember: 1) Try to use PDA Plus for effort, not just outcome, to help children to engage in focal attention to make the connection to their positive behavior as they are doing it, e.g., “Samantha, you *are* cleaning up all the blocks. You are being responsible,” vs. “Samantha, you *cleaned up* all the blocks. That was responsible.” 2) Give PDA Plus *throughout the day*, not just occasionally.

- Teachers are really good at REMINDING children to use the expectations, e.g., “Be safe, use your walking feet,” or “Remember,

you need to be respectful to your friends.” Reminding isn’t the most effective way to teach because it doesn’t **involve** the children in thinking about what the expectations mean or what they can do/are doing to be safe, respectful, or friendly. Reminders are simply directions or corrections, *telling* a child what the teachers wants from them instead of *teaching* them the desired behaviors, or *involving* them in noticing their successful efforts. Reminding might be helpful once in awhile to prepare children to follow the rules and expectations during an activity, but children learn by doing and must be aware of what they did to really learn. A better **promotion** tool for learning than reminders, then, is PDA Plus since it focuses a child’s awareness (focal attention) on his or her behavior in the moment linked to the expectations, (e.g., “You are using walking feet. That is being safe.” or “You are taking turns on the bike, Thuy; that is being respectful.”)

- Similarly, it’s important to know that telling children when they are NOT meeting the expectations, (e.g., “You are **not** being respectful.” or “That is **not** safe.”) does not help them learn how to follow the rules or meet the expectations. When a teacher points out what children are not doing, it fails to teach them what they can or should be doing instead (see Handout, *Teach Me What To Do Instead*). In addition, pointing out what children are failing at risks leaving them feeling shamed or blamed instead of being encouraged to think of ways to be successful in the classroom.

If teachers see a child being disrespectful, unsafe, or unfriendly, try to **intervene** by encourage children’s thinking about replacement behaviors with prompts such as, “How can you do that respectfully?” or “What is a friendly way to do that?” Teachers can also use these questions in place of reminders mentioned above. Asking children such questions **promotes** learning by involving them in thinking of what to do instead of just telling them what they are doing wrong.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Involving children in learning the rules and the expectations is a foundational component of the

Teaching Pyramid framework's goal of promoting social and emotional development and preventing challenging behavior. It is also important as a means of avoiding shaming and blaming children or using other such tactics to "manage the classroom." Using the strategies noted above, teachers might begin to see the following develop in the children:

△ **A sense of belonging and significance:**

When children are involved in setting rules and linking them to the expectations it enhances their sense of belonging and significance, a crucial aspect of **promoting** social and emotional development. In short, when children work together with the teachers to create rules linked to expectations, they engage in a shared effort that promotes community and a sense of belonging. Being included is a fundamental desire for all people and for children it is essential for the trust and sense of safety necessary to engage in learning. Similarly, engaging with peers to develop classroom practices can give children a sense of significance. Their ideas matter. Belonging and significance are considered foundational components of the sense of well being that children need to be successful throughout their school years and beyond.

△ **Internal narrative:** With ongoing PDA Plus to acknowledge children's efforts to follow the rules and the expectations, children have the opportunity to develop an internal narrative, a story about themselves, that includes both an understanding of their positive behaviors and the impact they have on others. This can **promote** social and emotional development and **prevent** challenging behavior by giving children a sense of themselves that is positive and an understanding of their connection to those around them.

When teachers acknowledge children's efforts using PDA Plus, children have the chance to tune in to the positive behaviors they are using in the moment. Focal attention to their actions in this way can deepen their understanding of how to meet the expectations and increase the likelihood of replicating that behavior in the future since attention helps promote learning. In addition, the explicit, descriptive nature of

PDA Plus provides a strength based narrative to children regarding their actions and outcomes that they likely link to feeling states, (e.g., "I used my walking feet. That is what being safe means. It feels good when I am safe," or "I took turns on the bike. Now I know what taking turns means. I feel happy when I'm respectful"). When teachers describe how a child's demonstrated behaviors are linked to the expectations repeatedly and consistently, he or she has the chance to develop a positive internal narrative that may inform future choices: "I clean up my toys. I am respectful."

△ **Intrinsic motivation:** Like all humans, children desire belonging and significance, and are motivated, partially, by experiences that provide them with these sensations. PDA Plus **promotes** children's intrinsic motivation to follow the rules by focusing the child's attention on the safe, respectful, or friendly behaviors they exhibit when they do so; and begins to build a connection between those behaviors and feeling states that are positive. Most children are motivated to do more of what makes them feel included, accepted, and good about themselves. Instead of motivating them to have positive behavior through rewards, or extrinsic motivation, which is not effective in the long-term, PDA Plus helps children cast the spotlight of their attention inward on their actions and to make the connection between how those positive actions impact both their sense of well-being and that of those around them. As a result, children have the chance to begin to develop a sense of themselves as meaningful contributors to their classroom community, an important step toward creating a sense of self that will impact all of their choices.

△ **Self-understanding:** All of the outcomes described above for children contribute to the development of their self-understanding, which might be thought to include a sense of self, agency, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. As teachers describe children's actions and link them to positive outcomes (PDA Plus), children begin to develop an understanding about their strengths and abilities as well as their connection to other children and adults. Although self-understanding has the potential to continue to develop throughout

the life span, the messages children receive about themselves in early childhood are believed to be the foundation upon which all future sense of self is created and to impact behavior well into adulthood.

Teaching rules and expectations, then, is more than a classroom management tool; instead, it is an approach for *child development*. When teachers involve children in their learning through ongoing opportunities to reflect about themselves and the impact they have on those around them, it's a way to promote healthy social and emotional development and prevent challenging behavior. ☞