

## Chapter 9: How to Teach Any Procedure

### *Making your classroom management expectations a reality*

The steps are essentially the same when teaching any new concept or skill to students. You determine your expectations and goals, plan how to teach towards them, explain the material to students, and model how to apply the skill. Then you guide students through their own practice repeatedly while reinforcing accuracy and redirecting errors, reviewing the skill over time.

When we assume procedures don't need to be taught, or can be mentioned once or twice before mastery, we're forgetting about how the learning process works. It is no different from assuming that you don't have to teach subtraction if the kids already learned it last year. This is faulty thinking because your expectations are higher in the next grade level. Students are capable of learning and doing more. You have to teach the newer, more challenging content. What children did last year just laid the foundation for what you're going to teach this year.

## **Teach Procedures Like Any New Skill**

### **The Importance of Ongoing (Distributed) Practice**

You would never introduce the concept of subtraction and then expect mastery the following day: *I just told you that  $32-15=17$ ! Don't you know that? How many times do I have to show you how to regroup?* You know that for students to truly demonstrate mastery, they're going to need ongoing practice in a variety of situations, with lots of modeling and reinforcing. So why would children magically understand procedures upon the first introduction?

Similarly, you wouldn't expect students to remember everything about subtraction when it's been four months since the last time you mentioned the concept. The only way to ensure that students retain information is through

distributed practice (revisiting the same concepts and skills over and over throughout the year). Even if your current math focus is measurement, you would still give subtraction practice through warm-ups, math games, homework practice, and test reviews. One of the few advantages of our test-obsessed teaching culture is that school districts are finally planning opportunities for students to review and apply knowledge throughout the year. Just as you don't want students to be out of practice and 'forget' how to regroup on a state test, neither do you want them to 'forget' how to follow procedures. You MUST plan distributed practice for procedures.

Some students will grasp the concept of two-digit subtraction within a few lessons, maybe even after the first. Most of the class will need a little more practice. And some students still won't have a clue in June. But you don't give up. You keep providing more opportunities for practice and reinforcement. Even the most challenging students make progress. Your instruction in procedures and routines works the same way.

## **Precise Expectations**

### **What Exactly Do You Want?**

Specificity is crucial in regard to procedures, because if you don't know what you want and teach for it, you'll never get it. It is not enough to think, *I want students to line up quietly*. What does quietly mean? Is talking okay? What if it's whispering? Can they shuffle their feet? What if they hum or tap? And by line up, do you mean that students need to be in a straight line? What does straight look like?

Many times teachers think they have been clear with their expectations and are mystified as to why students are not meeting them. The answer often lies in the exactitude of instruction. If you taught your class to form a straight line but never specified how far from the wall they should walk, the line won't stay straight for long. If you don't specify how to leave an appropriate amount of space behind each child, you'll have clumps of students in some places and huge gaps elsewhere in the line. If these are the sort of problems you're having with your students, recognize that they are not your students' problems. There has

been a miscommunication, a gap between your expectations and theirs. You cannot punish children for their inability to read your mind.

## **What Not to Do**

Telling children what not to do is like telling a dog, “No!” when he jumps up on you. The dog gets frightened, but hasn’t a clue what he should be doing, so he tries the same thing over and over again or cowers in a corner. If you’ve ever trained a puppy, you know that the more effective command is “Off!” or “Down!” because these are specific actions that the dog can take to correct the behavior.

This is part of the reason why classroom rules are supposed to be phrased positively (instead of “No hitting” the teacher should say, “Keep your hands to yourself”). The first phrase requires a small child to independently determine a more appropriate action, while the second phrase gives her a concrete step to take and crystallizes the teacher’s expectations. If the child hears your warning and begins shoving her neighbor, technically she is obeying the “no hitting” rule—you haven’t told her not to push! But if you’ve said, “Keep your hands to yourself,” then you’ve specifically stated what the child needs to do with her hands instead of using them to harm others.

**Assume that if children don’t do what you ask, it’s because they don’t know how. A child may know WHAT to do, but not HOW to do it.**

This is not unlike the teacher’s situation—she knows WHAT procedures to teach but not HOW to teach them. The teacher is not purposefully being negligent in her procedures instruction. Most of the time, the kids aren’t being purposely negligent in following them. Both the student and the teacher need to learn HOW to do their respective jobs.

## **A Caution Against Misusing “We”**

It took me many years to figure out the dangers of including myself in a statement that was actually directed towards students. I was trained in college to use “we” whenever possible: *We need to get quiet. We need to put our pencils down. When we’re ready to line up, we’ll go to lunch.* The theory is that using this

pronoun connotes a team effort, in which 'we' work together to follow procedures and get work done.

This can send the wrong message to children when used to discuss responsibilities and expectations. Your job as a teacher and theirs as students are very different. You are not waiting for yourself to be quiet, you are waiting for them. *When you're ready to line up, I can take you to lunch. When you are quiet, I can show you our activity. When you put your pencil down, I can explain the next direction.* These statements show children the powerful connection between their behavior and how the classroom is run (see Chapter 14). Students will learn that their choices influence your decisions and the outcome of the school day.

In this way, differentiating between *you* and *I* empowers and motivates students to follow routines. It also confers a great authority to the teacher that is sacrificed when the word 'we' is used. "We worked really hard today, so maybe we'll get to play outside a little longer!" sends a completely different message than, "You all worked really hard today and were so on-task! I will give you those five minutes you saved to play outside."

Saying "we" is very effective when you truly do need to work together to accomplish a goal. I use the term a lot in my classroom when the students and I are in a joint position ("We'll finish our science lesson tomorrow" or "We'll go out to the playground after this"). Just be cautious not to say "we" when your actions are separate from those you expect from students.

## Using Signals

Having something other than the sound of your voice as a signal during routines can sharpen students' focus and instill automatic responses. You can use timers, bells, rain sticks, chimes, and so on. I especially like little clickers (as seen in the center of the photo). These can be purchased in pet stores and are great for when you need a sound that's softer and quicker than a bell. Teach students not to



begin until they hear a particular signal, and to freeze whenever they hear it again. More information about using signals when giving directions is provided in Chapter 26, Making the Most of Every Moment.

## Reinforcement Narration and Performance Feedback

These are some fancy-sounding terms I chose to concisely describe a process I'll be referencing throughout this book.

**Reinforcement narration** is the act of talking students through a procedure or routine to draw attention to what they're doing correctly or incorrectly, e.g., *Let's watch team one line up. Oh, look, Maria and John remembered to push their chairs in. And now Isaiah's doing it, too. None of them are talking to each other. See how silent they are as they walk over to their places? Isaiah is facing straight ahead. Maria is checking to make sure she is one arm's length behind him. The entire team has gotten in line and is waiting quietly for the other children to get behind them. I'm going to call team two next, and I want you to notice how team one stays quiet even while the second group is getting in line behind them. You simply narrate what you see or give a synopsis to reinforce behaviors.*

**Performance feedback** is your evaluation of how well students are meeting your expectations. You can give some of the feedback yourself and elicit student input part of the time to keep the children actively involved in the process. *How did this last team do when you were watching them line up? Did they get in place without talking or making noises? Are they standing an arm's length apart from each other? Something is happening with the back of the line there—what needs to be fixed? Okay, so someone needs to put his hands down at his sides. How does it look now? Alright, we've got everyone in line—I'm looking to see how well you all have followed our guidelines. I see everyone standing on the third tile, which means the line is straight. I don't hear anyone making noise with their bodies, so the line is quiet. This is exactly the way you should be standing in line. This is what I expect to see every time we line up. You can do it. This is excellent.*

## **Steps for Teaching ANY Procedure or Routine**

I've dedicated the entire third section of this book to procedures and routines, because there are specific hints, tips, and guidelines for managing each one. But the teaching process is very simple, and once you understand it, you can apply the steps to any procedure you want. Knowing how to teach procedures means you can modify and adapt your routines continually throughout the year without confusing children or creating chaos. Once you understand this, you will have complete control over the way your classroom is run and total freedom to create needed change.

Staying focused on your own expectations is the key to teaching routines. The entire process is about what you do with expectations: determine, plan how to teach, explain, model, guide, reinforce, and review/adapt through ongoing practice.

### **1. Clearly *determine* your own expectations.**

Figure out what you want ahead of time. You should record your expectations as you plan. Your list will be a great reference for future years when you wonder, "What exactly WAS my procedure for that?"

### **2. *Plan how you will teach* your expectations.**

Next, design the lesson that will present your expectations. Decide what you will say, examples and non-examples you want to give, how much student input you will elicit, how you will model, and how you will manage student practice. I suggest standing in your classroom before school and saying the words out loud to get comfortable with the phrasing and help you anticipate issues that will arise during the lesson.

### **3. *Explain* your expectations and the reasons for them.**

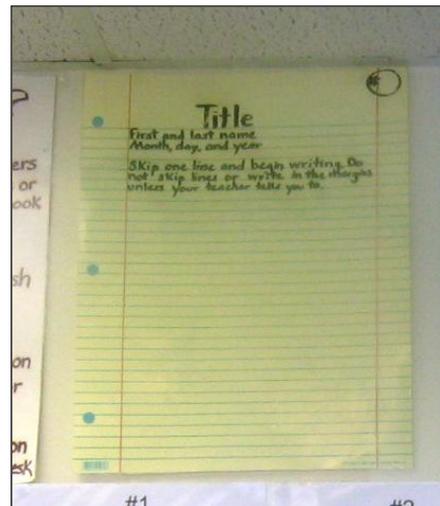
As an introduction to your lesson, you will need to explain why you feel the need for a particular procedure. ***Students need to understand that there is a***

**problem and you have a solution.** For your initial introduction to basic procedures, this may be general: “What would happen if everyone moved down the hall in any way they wanted? Why do we need hallway rules?” However, the more specific you can be about an actual problem, the more students will buy into your solution. “I tripped over two backpacks this morning. I also saw someone get their pencil stepped on and broken because it was on the floor. This tells me that we have a problem with messy desk areas. It is becoming unsafe and supplies are getting broken and lost. We need to fix that. I’m going to show you how to keep a neat desk so that you will know where all of your supplies are and nothing will happen to them.”

As you teach each criterion of your expectations, make sure the reasons are clear to students. “Whenever you pass in papers, you’ll hand them to the person on your right. *That way no one gets confused about which direction to pass.* Only the person on the end of your row will put the papers into a neat stack. *If every person in the row tries to line the papers up perfectly, it will take forever to get the papers in.* You can demonstrate your reasoning as appropriate. “Here, I’ll show you. Team one, I want you to pass your papers in, and as you get the stack on your desk, fix it up so everything’s exactly even... See how long this is taking? We’ll be late for lunch every single day! No one will get to finish their dessert! Team one, try it again and this time, just pass the stack gently and quickly to the person to your right, and the person on the end will fix them. There, see how fast that was? This is the reason why only one person will straighten the stack of papers.”

#### 4. **Model your expectations.**

You will be the first to demonstrate your expectations because only you truly understand them. Use reinforcement narration so students pick up on the things you are doing and understand how your actions contribute to the overall goals of the procedure. “Watch as I show you how to head your paper just like the poster shows. I’m putting the title in the big top part. That’s called the top margin. Notice how I don’t use up the entire space. Now I’m going to put my name on the first line. Am I



skipping a line now? Right. Watch what I put on the second line. The date, exactly! See how I am writing first the day, then the month, then the year. Oops, I made a mistake! Am I bunching up my paper and starting all over? No way, I'm not going to waste it. I'm going to gently erase...."

Sometimes students are fascinated by this sort of demonstration and will hang in there with you for in-depth modeling, and you should take advantage of their interest! But in general, teacher modeling should be kept brief and involve students as much as possible to keep them attentive. Their guided practice will be an opportunity for you to reinforce in more detail what you've modeled.

### **5. Guide students through practice using reinforcement narration.**

Have several groups of children 'try out' what you just showed them. The rest of the class should watch and prepare to give feedback afterwards. "Now it's your turn to try returning workbooks to the shelf correctly. Let's start with group three. Right now the rest of you are going to watch them and give feedback—that means let them know how well they followed the procedure. Group three, come show us how it's done." Telling children that they will be asked to evaluate and later replicate what the other kids are doing will keep the whole class motivated to follow along.

Use reinforcement narration to help children make sense of what they're seeing. "Kylie is walking quietly up to the shelf. She's found her number and is putting her science book right next to it. Hmm, I see Rhea putting her book on a different shelf than the one I showed you all. Rhea, look to see what Kylie did. Exactly. Now Rhea's putting her book next to Kylie's..."

### **6. Give performance feedback about student practice.**

"Some people were confused about where to put their books, but they watched their friends, and they fixed their mistakes. That was a smart strategy. We decided there would be no talking when returning the books to the shelves. Did you hear any noise? Neither did I."

Student input may also lead to clarification of criteria. "Wait, Tom has his hand up, yes, Tom, did you hear noise?... Okay, so Tom is thinking that when Melanie

dropped her book, that was making noise. Good point. We should definitely not be dropping any books on purpose. Did Melanie choose to drop her book? So it was an accident? Accidents will happen sometimes. Melanie handled it by picking up her book without saying a word. She didn't yell out. No one else started talking to her about it, or laughed at her. How did the group handle the accident? Okay, so that's what we should do, then. This group followed the guidelines."

The feedback can also set the expectation for improvement the next time. "It did take a little long, though. Let's see if the next group can do this faster, without having to dig through all the books for the right place to return them. This group will still walk and not push each other, but they'll try to be just a bit quicker."

## **7. Review your expectations as many times as needed with ongoing practice, constantly at first and periodically throughout the entire school year.**

Practice your procedures and routines as often as possible during the first few weeks of school. You will get tired of it before students demonstrate mastery, so prepare yourself to be exceptionally patient! Remember that the time you are investing now will result in fewer reminders throughout the year. You will notice that things run significantly smoother in your classroom in a very short time.

After kids have practiced a routine several times, they can start to self-evaluate. Ask questions such as, *How did we do with the pledge of allegiance this morning? Were most people standing straight with their right hands over their hearts? Did you hear more people reciting the pledge today than yesterday? What happened when it was time to sit down? What should we do differently tomorrow during the pledge?*

As you plan situations for guiding students, keep in mind that distributed training and practice will be more effective than massed practice, meaning that students will retain more when opportunities for practice are spread out over time. Distributed practice allows time for information to consolidate and sink in, and helps transfer learning from short-term to long-term memory.

One way I plan for ongoing reinforcement throughout the year is to play the 'Procedure Review Game' with my kids. When I was student teaching, I got the idea to write procedural questions on slips of paper and have children take turns drawing them out of a bag and calling on peers to answer them. The game was so popular that I've used it every year I've taught, and recently transferred the questions to a Power Point presentation in which the questions flash up on the screen with sound effects. (The answers aren't provided, because I want to be able to revise my procedures without having to update the game every time.) We play the game a lot in the beginning of the year, and the kids never seem to get tired of it! I reintroduce it around holidays, the last month of school, and other chaotic times of the year, as well as when a new student enrolls, to ensure that expectations are firmly established. You can download the game and modify it to fit your needs by visiting [TheCornerstoneForTeachers.com](http://TheCornerstoneForTeachers.com).

## **Revising Expectations and Criteria**

You will probably come up with additional criteria as you model for students or guide them through practice, and that's okay. If the children are not successful because you didn't address certain criteria or explain it clearly enough, you can add new information. "I'm noticing that some people are standing at the water fountain for a very long time. This is causing the people behind them to get impatient. Let's try a solution to fix that problem. I'll have the drink monitor count to five while each person gets water, and then that person's turn will be up. Jessica, will you try that for us? Let's watch and see how that works..."

If children are following the procedure exactly as you showed them yet things aren't working because your design is flawed, you can address that, too. "Hmm, five seconds doesn't seem to be quite long enough. Everyone is very thirsty from being outside. Jessica, would you please try counting to eight instead? Great... okay, that seems to be better. Let's make eight our magic number at the water fountain for now."

As you develop a rapport with your kids, they will begin making their own suggestions ("It's really hot today, do you think we should make the magic number ten?"). I require students to raise their hands before submitting any questions or comments to me, and if they have a lot to say, I'll ask them to wait until a specified time to give me their ideas, so student suggestions are always presented in an orderly and respectful way. Many times my students come up

with more effective procedures than I do! They know I value their input and am always looking for a better way to do things.

Children don't need to believe you are perfect and all knowing. They should understand that accruing knowledge is a flexible and ongoing process, and that you are a learner, as well. Students will respect you more for addressing flaws and weaknesses than if you pretend they do not exist and stick with ineffective procedures and routines. You will not lose control of the class if you continue to present a calm, assertive demeanor. Your tone and word choice will either indicate, *Uh-oh, this isn't working—now what?* or *Hmm, this isn't working. I'm going to figure out a solution right now with my class because I am in charge and capable of handling every situation.*

## **When Students Don't Meet Your Expectations**

### **Repeat the Practice, Not the Command**

If your students heard you the first time you asked them to do something, don't repeat yourself. Ask them questions instead to encourage problem solving. "What should you be doing right now?" is one of my favorite redirection responses. Sometimes the child will automatically self-correct, and I thank them, and sometimes the child will answer my question outright, and I say, "You know it! Good."

If a child can't respond to my question about what she should be doing, I know I need to give a refresher course in the procedure. I typically have a handful of students who need extra time to process expectations. I sometimes have to walk them through procedures even at the end of the school year. "What should you be doing in line? Right, standing quietly. What's the second thing you need to remember to do? Good. What else? Which one of those things are you not doing? When you've got all three things down, we can go to art."

Nagging, pleading, and begging students does not communicate that you are in control of the situation. When you're tempted to repeat your command, give performance feedback instead. "Please have a seat... I see three teams sitting down and one team still playing. Good, now we're waiting for just one person to follow the directions. I see all hands folded on top of desks. That means we're

ready now to begin. Oh wait, there's someone standing up again... Okay, great. Let's start."

If the performance feedback is taking longer than what's described in the previous paragraph, you may want to start from scratch and take a firmer, less upbeat tone. "Wait. I don't like the way this is going. We're wasting too much time. Let's all try that again. When you hear the signal, everyone is going to sit down in their chairs immediately and fold their hands on their desks. I believe every person will be successful this time."

Keep practicing until students are meeting your expectations exactly. Do not settle for anything less than what they are developmentally capable of doing. Give students frequent opportunities to practice procedures that are being done sloppily. Remind them of the criteria before you give the direction: "When you hear the signal, I'm going to ask you to put away your books. You will not move until you hear the signal. Remind your friends what to do—your book will be placed in a neat? [Stack] Inside your desk. You will stay? [Seated] You will fold your hands on top of your? [Desk] Will your mouth be moving at all? Wonderful—you know how to put away your books. Here comes the signal." Use reinforcement narration as students complete the task and performance feedback afterwards.

## **"Go Back and Try It Again"**

When you see students make any deviation from the routine, call attention to the situation immediately ("Two people haven't pushed their chairs in" or "I hear talking at the end of the line, and we can't move forward until it stops"). Sometimes this will need to be done for the entire class, and sometimes for individual children.

The consequence for an incorrectly followed procedure is not punishment. It's additional practice. Say, "I'm still noticing that chair problem we just talked about. Let's have a seat and try it again. I will call you to line up once more and this time we'll see if everyone can remember to push their chairs in." This is done very calmly and in a matter-of-fact tone. You should not get angry or express any emotion at all: students have chosen a behavior, and you are following up with a logical consequence to make sure your expectations are met. As soon as children do the right thing, re-enforce the appropriate behavior. "Team one has

pushed in their chairs. Thanks. Team two, you can line up again. They've got their chairs in, also. Great... I knew you all could do it! Now we can leave."

Students should be expected to redo the procedure without complaint or showing any outward signs of disrespect. More details about gaining students' cooperation in redoing procedures can be found in Chapter 11, *Tips and Tricks for Difficult Procedures*.

## **Students With Special Needs**

You may have a child who simply isn't able to function on the same level as the rest of the class in terms of procedures. This child will need additional structure and reinforcement through an individual behavior plan. If you implement it consistently, you will see progress. Sometimes other children will question why the rules seem different for another child. Chapter 17 explains in detail how to communicate with the class about why you differentiate for students' individual needs.

## **Avoiding a Slow Descent Into Laziness**

When expectations have been taught effectively, students will start to successfully meet them with little reinforcement. Following the procedure becomes the norm. The teacher relaxes because she doesn't have to be constantly on top of the kids, and then the kids start to relax. That's when you may see a slow, almost imperceptible decline in the way students perform routines. Children do this when they think you don't care anymore or have stopped watching.

This problem can be averted by giving performance feedback every now and then. When the class does something exactly to your expectations (even if it's after five sloppier executions), a simple compliment can make a huge difference. "Wow, did you notice how quiet it was in here when the dismissal announcements came on? Not a single person was talking! I love when that happens because we can hear everything being said and we know whose bus was called." You can also compliment individuals: "Hey, that was exactly the right way to return your books to the class library! The smallest books are in the front of the bin, and they're all facing out. Thank you for being so responsible with our books." This statement is not made to manipulate or guilt-trip those children

who followed the procedure incorrectly—it's a genuine compliment meant to reward appropriate behavior.

Call attention to general problems so students know you're paying attention. Because the procedure has already been taught, your reminder will take less than thirty seconds. "Our class this year has been doing a great job with stacking chairs at the end of the day. But I've noticed that a lot of people have been forgetting this week. I keep having to remind individual children and I think we should address the problem as a class. Someone remind us why we need to stack chairs? Thank you. So let's make sure we handle that when we line up." The next time children leave the room, give performance feedback: either, "Thanks for remembering—it will be so much easier for the custodian to clean our floors now" or "Let's try that again and get it right."

## **Choosing Related Rewards and Incentives**

You can reward students for completing procedures correctly, but that should not be the incentive or students will become dependent on extrinsic reinforcers. Any rewards you provide should be occasional and unexpected, and tied directly to students' behavior. For example, you could say, "I didn't have to stop this lesson one time because people were talking! Everyone was following along. We actually finished a few minutes early! I think I'll let you have those extra minutes to play with the manipulatives before we clean them up. Thanks for being so respectful of our time." Or, "You all used the dry erase boards just the right way today. I didn't see anyone drawing and everyone erased only when I gave the signal. You've shown me that you can be responsible, and that makes me want to give you more privileges. I'm going to plan another dry erase board activity for tomorrow. The more you follow my directions, the more fun things I'll trust you to handle."

In general, I want students to do the right thing because they see the benefits of doing so, not to earn a prize or gain recognition. However, an occasional, unexpected reward accompanied by verbal reinforcement can provide the additional incentive needed during procedures that require a lot of effort or self-control. So, I do occasionally use our class reward system (beads or tokens—see Chapter 16, Whole Class Reinforcement Systems) in conjunction with procedure practice, especially at the beginning of the year.

Rewards show students that the teacher is paying attention and still values a procedure that may not be mentioned on a regular basis anymore. For example, I usually don't say anything about heading papers after November because I expect students to do it correctly without reminders. So, every few weeks in the winter and spring I'll walk around with beads and say, "Wow, look at all the people who still remember to write their FULL name and put the date in the right place! I'm so impressed."

Interestingly, kids respond just as well to the compliment alone as they do when I pass out beads. I tell the students that I consider beads in this scenario to be a thank-you gift, and a gift must be given from the heart—it cannot be requested or expected. "I don't always give beads for this behavior, because I expect you to do it automatically. But I appreciate not having to remind you all about it. It makes me happy to see that you are so independent. Your behavior is making it fun and easy for me to teach. Sometimes I thank you with my words, and sometimes I want to give you something to let you know I appreciate you and your hard work."

I also use written compliments to let children know I appreciate their cooperation with procedures and routine expectations. I spent ten minutes one day typing up single-sentence thank you notes (such as "Thanks for keeping your desk clean, even when no one is looking"),



copied and pasted each sentence repeatedly on a page, and printed out several copies on colorful paper. I cut the slips apart and keep them filed in the box shown, along with stickers, pencils, and bookmarks. Occasionally I will place one of these items on selected students' desks along with thank you notes (or just the note by itself), so when kids enter the classroom, they see a token of my appreciation. This is an easy way to recognize children's efforts to be on time for school,

wear their uniforms, return papers, and demonstrate general responsibility. Small gestures like this require very little effort on the teacher's part, and can work wonders in motivating children and gaining their cooperation.