

Classroom management explainer

Establishing and maintaining rules

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Effective classroom management creates safe and supportive learning environments for all students. This explainer 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 explainer focuses on establishing and maintaining classroom rules, describing how rules allow teachers to clearly state the behaviour expectations for all students in the learning environment. Related explainers focus on [positive teacher–student relationships](#), [high expectations for student behaviour](#) and [teaching routines](#).

A rule is usually a short instruction for conduct or action that everyone is expected to know, follow and refer to regularly (Bennett, 2020). A list of rules should be as simple and as short as possible (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Bennett, 2020) to avoid students' working memory becoming overloaded, help them to remember what is expected, and limit distraction from their learning (Alter & Haydon, 2017).

To explicitly teach rules:

1. Introduce and explain each rule clearly (what and why). Display them in the learning environment where students can easily see them.
2. Check – and further develop, where necessary – students’ understanding of what the rules should and should not ‘look like’ and ‘sound like’ through class discussion, modelling and practise with students.
3. Monitor all students and reinforce the rules consistently and fairly by reminding students of and practising the rules when necessary.
4. Acknowledge or praise the behaviour, rather than the student, when rules are followed to support students’ intrinsic motivation to repeat the behaviour.

Adapted from Archer & Hughes (2011) and Bennett (2020)

Rules and routines should be based on the school community’s values and perspectives to create effective and appropriate learning environments. For example, while eye contact may be routinely expected by many teachers during learning interactions, avoidance of eye contact is a gesture of respect for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Neurodivergence among students can result in different presentations of what active listening looks like in a classroom setting. It is important that teachers recognise and value diverse student and community perspectives to create classroom conditions that are inclusive, culturally safe and conducive to learning (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2022). This means starting by understanding and listening to students and families, and building that into efforts to strengthen [relationships](#).

The importance of establishing and maintaining classroom rules

Well-designed, positively framed and [clearly communicated](#) classroom rules help to promote safety and create a learning environment where teachers can teach and students can learn (Archer & Hughes, 2011). The function of a rule is to create a shared understanding and encourage or prevent behaviour by clearly stating the expectations a teacher has for students (Wong & Wong, 2018). Students feel confident and safe in their learning environment when teachers set and maintain boundaries, through clear classroom rules and [high expectations](#) (Wong & Wong, 2018).

Teaching and maintaining rules

Rules should be introduced on the first day of school and then explicitly taught in small chunks over the following days and weeks (Archer & Hughes, 2011). *Teaching* the rules, instead of *telling* students the rules, proactively supports students to understand and develop the expected behaviours, and moves beyond an emphasis on compliance (Hepburn et al., 2021).

Rules should clearly communicate expected behaviour and be positively framed. This creates clarity about what students need to do, adds to a positive learning environment, and reduces the likelihood of resistance (Archer & Hughes, 2011). For example, 'Listen to your teacher and classmates' is better than 'Don't talk while others are talking' (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

When deciding which rules to incorporate in your classroom or school, reflect on the expectations and the disengaged or disruptive behaviours the rules need to cover. Develop age appropriate, positively framed, simple rules that best address these, such as:

- Treat everybody with kindness.
- Listen and speak in a respectful way.
- Listen when the teacher is talking.
- Care for others, belongings and the environment.
- Walk quietly through the school.
- Be prepared with required items.

Limit the number of rules – 3 to 6 are adequate (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Wong & Wong, 2018). Having the fewest number of rules possible to maintain order and focus and ensuring they are easy to follow makes it easier for students to demonstrate the expected behaviours (Bennett, 2020).

Once taught, rules should be regularly reviewed. This can be done through classroom discussion, recitation, modelling and practising of expected behaviours (Alter & Haydon, 2017). Visual cues can help students remember the rules, such as a daily review and discussion of rules on a slide, displaying and referring to them on a poster or gluing them into the cover of students' books for quick reference.

Rules need to be made clear in various routines, and students should be prompted or pre-corrected prior to an activity to support them to successfully follow them (Simonsen et al., 2008). Practically, this may include reminders to look and listen when the teacher or another student is speaking, walk quietly when moving around the room or school or keep objects where they belong. Some students, such as those impacted by trauma, may experience difficulty in adhering to rules they don't understand or relate to especially when it comes to regulating emotions, making plans or dealing with changes in the routines. Some students may need additional guidance, support and scaffolds to help them learn and follow rules.

To acknowledge a rule has been followed, use specific acknowledgement or praise for the action. Specific praise can increase intrinsic motivation because it develops students' awareness of exactly what they are doing that is worthy of praise (Wong & Wong, 2018).

A 'rule reminder' can be used to correct low-level disengaged or disruptive behaviour. A teacher can state the behaviour they are observing, remind the student of the rule, allow time for the student to correct their action, and say 'Thank you' once corrected. For example, '[Student name]. You're talking to the person next to you while I'm talking. The rule is 'Face the front and listen when I am talking to the class'. Do that now, please. [Allow time for the student to respond.] Thank you'. More serious behaviour should be managed using the school's behaviour procedures.

Consistent whole-school approaches can help create safe and supportive learning environments in which all students are able to learn. A shared language and understanding of the rules should be developed (AERO, 2021). If the rules that guide student behaviours are taught and displayed across all classrooms, and all staff members remind students of the rules if they are not followed, students can know and understand what is expected of them.

Scenario

This scenario provides a practical example of the evidence summarised in this explainer. It provides insight into one teacher's approach to creating and implementing effective, positively framed classroom rules to create a predictable, safe and supportive learning environment.

In an effort to create a safe and structured classroom environment, Mr B. creates 10 classroom rules aimed at preventing unwanted classroom behaviours, such as 'No calling out', 'Don't be late', 'Don't be rude' and 'Never leave without permission.'

However, some students are regularly not following them and enforcing them leads to disruptions in the classroom, wasting teaching time. He discusses the situation with a colleague, who advises him to reduce the number of rules and reframe them to be more positive. His colleague also advises Mr B. to make sure the rules are always clearly visible in the classroom.

Mr B. notices his colleague doesn't face the same issues with behaviour in their classroom. Mr B. decides to give the advice a go. He reduces the number of rules to 5, and makes the language of the rules more positive, such as 'Listen when the teacher is talking' instead of a negative command like 'Don't talk when the teacher is talking'. Mr B. checks his new rules with his colleague, makes a poster to display the rules in his classroom, and prints the rules for students to stick inside the front cover of their books.

Mr B. makes time to teach the rules to his students so they all understand what is expected of them. Mr B. also models the rules, demonstrating what they should look like, and explaining why they're important for a safe and supportive learning environment. He regularly revises the rules with his students.

Through this approach, Mr B. and his students develop a shared understanding of the classroom rules and expectations for behaviour. Mr B. makes monitoring and reinforcing the positively framed rules part of his daily teaching practice, acknowledges students' behaviour when they follow the rules, and refers to the rules when responding to disruptive behaviour. With this approach over time, his classroom becomes a more focused, supportive and positive learning environment.

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.

Further reading

Refer to the following to support the establishment of rules in your classroom:

Archer, A. L., & Hughes, C. A. (2011). *Explicit instruction: Effective and efficient teaching*. Guildford Press. (pp. 117–121)

Bennett, T. (2020). *Running the room: The teacher's guide to behaviour*. John Catt Educational. (pp. 213–219)

Wong, H. K., & Wong, R. T. (2018). *The first days of school: How to be an effective Teacher* (5th ed.). Harry K. Wong Publications. (pp. 201–203)

References

Alter, P., & Haydon, T. (2017). 'Characteristics of effective classroom rules: A review of the literature'. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 40(2), 114–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406417700962>

Archer, A. L., & Hughes, C. A. (2011). *Explicit instruction: Effective and efficient teaching*. Guildford Press.

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2021). *Focused classrooms: Managing the classroom to maximise learning*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/resources/focused-classrooms-practice-guide>

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2022). *Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce*. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/intercultural-development/building-a-culturally-responsive-australian-teaching-workforce>

Bennett, T. (2020). *Running the room: The teacher's guide to behaviour*. John Catt Educational.

Hepburn, L., Beamish, W., & Alston-Knox, C. L. (2021). Classroom management practices commonly used by secondary school teachers: Results from a Queensland survey. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 48(1), 485–505. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00402-y>

Simonsen, B., Fairbanks, S., Briesch, A., Myers, D., & Sugai, G. (2008). Evidence-based practices in classroom management: Considerations for research to practice. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 31(3), 351–380. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/20/article/240375>

Wong, H. K., & Wong, R. T. (2018). *The first days of school: How to be an effective teacher* (5th ed.). Harry K. Wong Publications.