

Rulemaking in the Early Childhood Classroom

Involving young children in making classroom rules is one way to help children become more self-regulating. When children participate in deciding what sorts of rules they need in their classroom, they are presented with opportunities to think about why they need rules, what rules would help them regulate their behavior in the classroom, and how they can best enforce the rules with each other. Taking responsibility for these aspects of life in the classroom teaches children how to get along with others in group settings.

Rationale

- **Oral language.** When children are encouraged to discuss the need for particular rules and formulate the wording for those rules, they are given the opportunity to develop their oral language skills.
- **Written language.** When teachers write children's rules in their exact words, children are motivated to read and make sense of the written words.
- **Moral development.** When children are asked to think about the necessity for rules, they are led to reason about issues of respect for persons and property and fair treatment of others.
- **Self-regulation.** When children are consulted about the rules in the classroom, they have the opportunity to understand why they have particular rules. This understanding in turn leads to increased feelings of ownership of classroom rules and procedures, shared responsibility for what happens in the classroom, and feelings of necessity for following and enforcing rules.

Guidelines for Involving Young Children in Rule Making

- **Emphasize the reasons for rules.**
When the reasons for rules are presented to children in ways that they can understand (for example, "so that everyone will be safe and happy in our class," "so that everyone will have fair turns with the materials," "so that the guinea pig doesn't get hurt," etc.), children are led to think about rules as necessary and sensible guidelines for behavior rather than as unnecessary and bothersome restrictions.
- **Conduct rule making discussions in response to particular needs or problems.**
This focuses children's attention on the need for particular rules. It is also helpful when discussing rules with young children who may not be capable of sustaining attention through a long discussion of all needed classroom rules. The teacher can break the discussion up into short group time sessions. If multiple problems occur in the class, discussions can be held for each problem separately.
- **Lead children toward positive rules.**
When rule discussions are presented to children in positive terms (for example, "What would people need to do so that everyone can be happy in our class?"), chances are greater that children will

respond with positive rules rather than lists of prohibitions. However, children may also think of long lists of "Don'ts" and these should be accepted. Sometimes children think about the rules very literally, and they need to list all of the prohibitions.

- **Record children's rules in their own words.**

When children see their ideas and rules written down verbatim, they are much more likely to remember the series of events surrounding the creation of the rule, and the rule will be more meaningful to them. They are also more likely to take ownership of the rules. (Children can sometimes be heard to announce proudly, "That's my rule!") Teachers should write down exactly what children say, even if the grammar is questionable.

- **Use child-made rules.**

When children are given rules made by adults, they will experience these rules as coming from outside themselves, and will not be motivated to take ownership of them. The teacher can, however, subtly suggest rules without actually giving them to children. For example, the teacher can state, "I have noticed that we have been having some problems at the water table with children slipping on the wet floor. Does anyone have any ideas about how we can solve this problem?" Children are then invited to think of possible solutions which can be stated as rules.

Examples of Rules Made by Young Children

Guinea Pig Rules

- Ask Mrs. Wells before you get the guinea pig out.
- Be careful--no hurting the guinea pig.
- Don't squeeze, drop, or throw him. Hold him gently.
- Don't put him on the floor. Hold him.
- Don't pull his hair. Be gentle.
- Don't pull his hand or sit on him.
- Don't let him down in the house. Hold him in a blanket.
- Hold him like a baby.

Mary Wells's kindergarten class

Investigators Class Rules

- Call them your name. Don't call them naughty girl or naughty boy.
- Use your words. And if the words don't work, go get the teacher.
- Friendly hands and friendly words.
- No hitting.

Peige Fuller's four-year-old class

For more detail on rule making in the early childhood classroom:

DeVries, R. & Zan, B. (1994) *Moral classrooms, moral children: Creating a constructivist atmosphere in early education.* New York: Teachers College Press.