

Rulemaking with Young Learners

PURPOSE OF RULEMAKING WITH YOUNG LEARNERS

Involving young learners in making classroom rules is one way to help them become more self-regulating. When young learners participate in deciding what sorts of rules they need in their classrooms, 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 in the classroom teaches young learners how to get along with others in group settings.



RATIONALE

- **Oral language development.** When young learners 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 development.** When teachers write their students' rules in their exact words, children are motivated to read and make sense of the written words.
- **Moral development.** When young learners 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 young learners 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 LEARNERS IN RULE MAKING

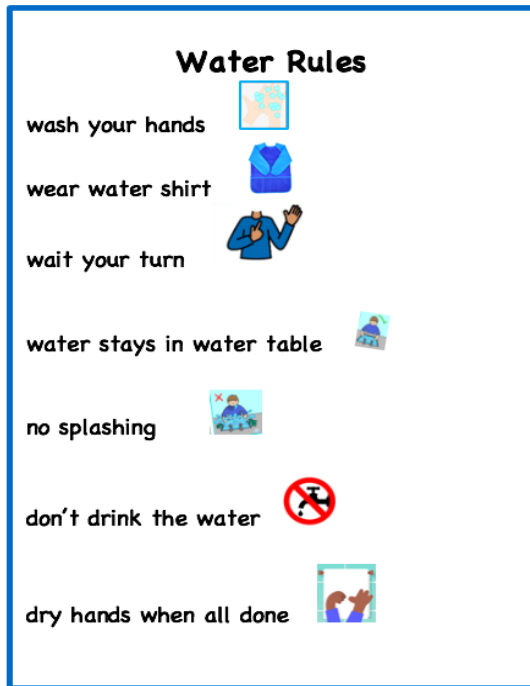
- **Emphasize the reasons for rules.**
When the reasons for rules are presented to young learners in ways that they can understand (for example, *so that everyone will be safe and happy in our class; so that everyone will have fair turns with the materials; so that the guinea pig doesn't get hurt, etc.*) young learners 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 young learners' attention on the need for particular rules. It is also helpful when discussing rules with young learners 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 young learners toward positive rules.**
When rule discussions are presented to young learners in positive terms (for example, *"What would people need to do so that everyone can be happy in our class?"*), chances are greater that young learners will respond with positive rules rather than lists of prohibitions. However, young learners may also think of long lists of *Don'ts* and these should be accepted. Sometimes young learners think about the rules very literally, and they need to list all of the prohibitions.
- **Record young learners' rules in their own words.**
When young learners 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. (Young learners can sometimes be heard to announce proudly, *"That's my rule!"*) Teachers should write down exactly what the children say, even if the grammar is questionable.
- **Use child-made rules.**
When young learners 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?"* Young learners are then invited to think of possible solutions which can be stated as rules.
- **Consider necessary accommodations.**
For children who are visual learners, dual language learners, or have auditory processing issues, add visuals that represent rules to supplement written words. For children who have memory issues, revisit the rules on a regular basis.

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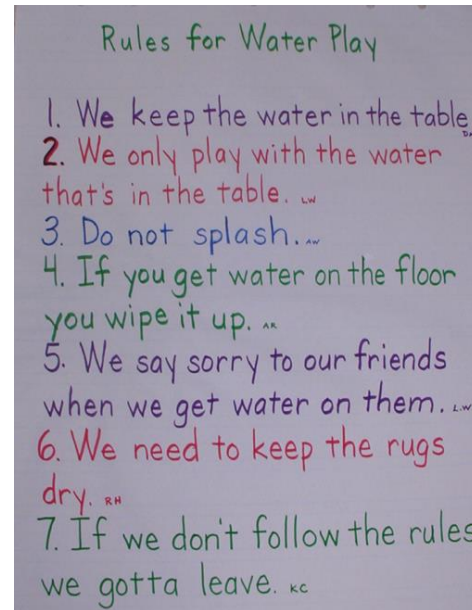


EXAMPLES OF RULES MADE BY YOUNG LEARNERS:

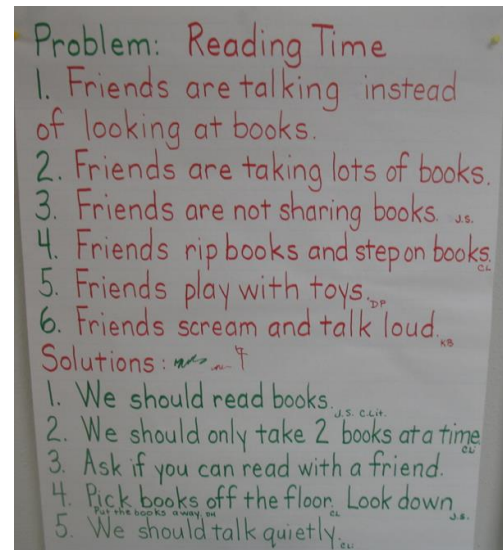
Stephanie Miller's four-year-old-class



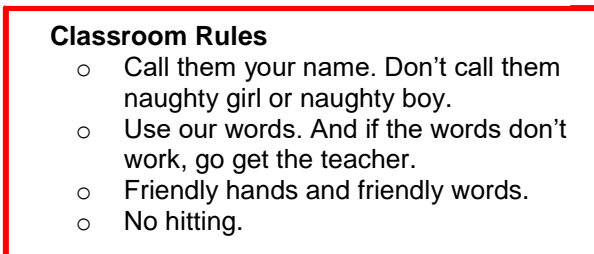
Tara Condon's kindergarten class



Gwen Harmon's four-year-old class



Peige Fuller's four-year-old-class



For more detail on rule making with young learners:

DeVries, R., & Zan, B. (2012). *Moral classrooms, moral children: Creating a constructivist atmosphere in early education* (Vol. 47). Teachers College Press.

Manning, M., Szecsi, T., Geiken, R., Van Meeteren, B. D., & Kato, T. (2009). Teaching Strategies: Putting the Cart before the Horse: The Role of a Socio-moral Atmosphere in an Inquiry-based Curriculum. *Childhood Education*, 85(4), 260-263.

Van Meeteren, B. D. (2013). Looking for Social Studies... and Finding a Democratic Community in the Classroom. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 25(3), 27-31.