

# Teaching Secrets: Creating Positive Classroom Management



January 13, 2010

**By Marti Schwartz**

Classroom management issues are often the biggest impediment to learning for the novice teacher and even seasoned veterans. Any teacher can be suddenly derailed by outrageous behavior, and without a plan in place, all too often we respond as human beings rather than wise educators.

I'll confess, in fact, that I was well into my own teaching career before I fully admitted to myself how often this had happened to me. I decided to spend a summer thinking about how to better respond to unpredictable behavior problems and—most importantly—how to create a more positive atmosphere of trust and effort in my elementary classroom. Over time, what I came to see was that my own intense focus on problematic behaviors was harming that atmosphere. I knew I needed to shift that attention, but wasn't sure where to start.

## **A Cast of Characters**

"Concentrate on the positive." How many times had I heard that? But how? I'd spent years offering students rewards (stickers, tickets, tangibles, intangibles) for good behavior and come to realize how they were often self-defeating. Rather than developing internal pride in work well done, my students counted up their tickets and cashed them in for trinkets. One change I had already made was my "WOW folder." Each day at our Morning Meeting I would celebrate "great work" by reading aloud the child's name and stating what they had done well. Often their classmates would give an actual round of applause—which was lovely, but I knew academic success could not be the only thing I valued.

And then my eye fell on the collection of small stuffed animals and Beanie Babies that students had given me over the years. One was a cute little koala bear. Long ago I had pinned a button on his t-shirt that said, "School is

Cool.” That became the koala bear’s name—and Mr. School is Cool started moving around to kids’ desks rather than sitting up on the shelf. When a student showed exceptional thinking in a classroom discussion, I would offer up School is Cool. When someone shared a good idea, School is Cool would sit on his/her desk for the day. When “the lightbulb went on” and a student was able to articulate their learning to others, School is Cool was the mascot that underscored their words.

Soon a cast of characters entered my 3rd grade classroom. I introduced over the course of the first month of school. Whenever student demonstrated the characteristic (or need) that my little stuffed friends embodied, the doll made its way to the student’s desk. Intellectual effort was only one of many behaviors I wanted to encourage and reinforce. There was “The Walrus” for great work, “Wow” for extra effort, “Wings” for showing growth, “Helper” for the Helper of the Day, “Pinky” for exhibiting the character trait of the month. My Heart Rock was given to someone who “puts their heart into their work.” “Hugs” was the only stuffed animal a child could take on their own, whenever some extra emotional support was needed. “Bounce Back” was actually a small squishy basketball, offered after a student experienced any kind of meltdown or problem that was interfering with their day.

### **Attitude Change**

Did student behavior improve? Yes! Did my own attitude change? Profoundly. The more I looked for positive behaviors, the more I found to reward. If a student did something to earn a visit from one of our stuffed friends and I kept right on teaching, other students would often point out my oversight and help me to acknowledge the positives. Not every little friend was used every day, and not every student received each and every one of the “awards,” but they were an integral part of our classroom culture, and students clearly knew that I valued their effort and their thinking, as well as their good behavior.

And the behavior problems? There are *a/ways* problems, but I can honestly say that there were far less after I taught myself to always begin by looking for the positive. Instead of “dealing” with the problem (not always the best

strategy in the heat of the moment) my students were now asked to “Put it in the Problem Book, please.”

This required them to briefly answer two questions in (*What happened? What should you do next time?*) in a special notebook and put the notebook on my chair. They knew that later on, when it was not going to take away from class learning time, we would quietly discuss the issue. When I introduced this routine to the class, they voted on how many times each quarter one could sign the problem book before a parent would be called. As 8 year olds, they thought 8 was about right—in truth, only one student reached that number, during the first quarter of the year. After I met *with* him and his parents, sharing the entries he had recorded, his problem behaviors tapered off nicely.

Is this approach replicable? Absolutely! By focusing on the positive behaviors you want to reinforce, they will grow and blossom around you, as will the students you teach.

*Marti Schwartz is the creator and co-facilitator of NETWorking (Novice and Experienced Teachers Working Together) at Brown University. After a 30-year career in the elementary grades, she’s putting her literacy skills to good use this school year as a half-time English teacher in an urban charter high school.*