

Holding High Expectations for Behavior

Chapter One

I. Holding High Expectations for Student Behavior

II. Holding High Expectations for Yourself: Asserting Your Authority

Introduction

Close your eyes and picture yourself in front of your classroom during your first few weeks of teaching. What do you see? There is a continuum of possibilities, ranging from classrooms with a culture of achievement where students are sitting with hands folded in their laps on the community carpet, eagerly responding to questions and clapping when their peers give correct responses, to classrooms where the teacher stands helplessly at the front of the room, begging “settle down...stop...please” over the raucous conversations and antics of dozens of students.

As this text will illustrate, you can create a positive, achievement-oriented classroom environment. In the coming chapters, we will explore specific ways to build systems that enable and encourage your students to work hard toward academic goals. You will learn how to establish, teach, and implement rules and consequences and how to foster a constructive, learning-focused atmosphere that respects all students, motivates them to academic achievement and celebrates their accomplishments.

In this chapter, you will learn two of the most important principles you will need to internalize in order to build a culture of achievement in your classroom. We will first discuss the importance of holding high and explicit expectations for student behavior. Then, we will show you the importance of holding high expectations for your own ability to assert your authority when establishing and reinforcing appropriate student behavior. Before you develop rules or consequences, before you set up efficient procedures, before you teach your students how to interact with kindness, you must exhibit a deep belief in your students and a strong confidence in your authority to make this all happen.

Being both affirming and firm in the classroom often eludes beginner teachers, either because they abdicate their responsibility to establish and reinforce clear expectations out of diffidence or a hope to win students over by befriending them; or because their need for authority becomes an end in itself, and they fail to build a culture where students are excited about academic success in the ways you saw in the introduction to this text. As soon as you understand the importance of both high expectations and asserting your authority, you will be on your way to creating a classroom focused on learning. By the end of this chapter, you will realize that your students can indeed behave – and that you hold the key to help them do so.

I. Holding High Expectations for Student Behavior

Often when teachers think of high expectations for students, they think primarily in terms of having high expectations for academic potential and achievement. Most likely, you can list examples of having high expectations for student achievement: expecting that students will read, write, and solve problems at or above grade level; envisioning students scoring in the top percentiles on standardized tests; believing that students could receive local, state, or even national recognition for their work. Of course, none of these results come without an incredible amount of hard work from teachers and students in any community. But high expectations must exist for them to happen.

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You must have high expectations for student behavior as well. You must determine that your class of rambunctious second graders can line up and walk silently through the hallway without touching each other; that your after-lunch class of 35 garrulous eighth graders can complete their “Do Now” (a beginning of class warm-up activity) quietly and then smoothly transition into effective cooperative groups; that your sixth period World History class will praise and respectfully critique their classmates’ end-of-unit presentations. These types of classroom environments take shape through an incredible amount of hard work rooted in high expectations for behavior. What is the death knell of a classroom vision in which students are well-behaved, feel safe taking risks in front of their peers, and work collaboratively to attain success? Low behavioral expectations.

Low behavioral expectations manifest themselves either when teachers neglect to establish clear rules and procedures or, more common among first-year teachers, when they fail to respond when they see misbehavior. Teachers who do not believe their students *can* behave do not feel comfortable asking them to do so, generally resulting in a downward spiral in which students reinforce teachers’ low expectations. Let’s step back to examine misperceptions that might catalyze negative behavioral expectations. Understanding these misperceptions will help you be more aware of any damaging views you might bring into the classroom.

Lee and Marlene Canter, coauthors of *Assertive Discipline*¹, suggest four misperceptions that stand in the way of high behavioral expectations:

Myth: Students’ Emotional Problems Make Good Behavior Impossible

Reality: All children can behave, but some students may need someone to teach them how. Some teachers believe that students who frequently explode in anger, students who cry regularly, or students who seem unusually aloof and distant will only be able meet behavioral expectations in the classroom if they receive the help of a psychologist or other professional. It’s not uncommon to hear teachers claim, “Michael has serious emotional problems and simply cannot control his outbursts. How can I expect him to behave in the classroom? What he needs is professional help.” Later in this chapter you’ll read about a student who had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), aggressive tendencies, and an anger disorder who proved this myth wrong.

Myth: Inadequate Parenting Undermines a Teacher’s Ability to Maintain a Controlled Classroom

Reality: Teachers can create a classroom that leaves behind the stresses that may exist outside its walls. Sadly, more and more children today are growing up in homes torn apart by alcohol, drug abuse, neglect, abandonment, or even physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Many teachers assume this turmoil at home prevents students from meeting behavioral guidelines at school. Teachers declare, “You know who her mother is. Growing up in that home, it’s no wonder Chris has problems. Why do you even expect her to behave?” On the contrary, despite a turbulent home environment – whether real or perceived – students can rise to your high behavioral expectations.

Myth: Students Who Live in a Poverty-Stricken Environment Are Unable to Behave Appropriately

Reality: Students in any environment generally rise to the expectations set for them. Some teachers are convinced that given the problems faced by students growing up in low-income communities, those students simply cannot be expected to meet the same behavioral guidelines as students growing up in high-income communities. These teachers often maintain, “Look at what she sees just out her front door...of course she gets into trouble all of the time,” or “Children from that neighborhood have no

¹ Canter, Lee and Marlene Canter. *Assertive Discipline: Positive Behavior Management for Today’s Classroom*. Santa Monica, CA: Canter & Associates, Inc., 1992.

respect for adults, never mind teachers – what makes you think they will listen to *you?*” or “I can just tell that none of my students have desks at home or a quiet place to study.” Such overgeneralizations severely limit a teacher’s expectations and highlight the importance of remembering that every child’s situation is unique. As explained in the *Teaching As Leadership* text, students growing up in areas ravaged by poverty *can* exhibit excellent behavior and collaborate to create a community of trust and caring.

Myth: Students with Special Needs Cannot Behave in a General Education Classroom

Reality: Some students may need extra support in order to learn how to behave properly. As more and more students who receive special education services are included in general education classrooms, it has become increasingly common to hear of teachers who believe they cannot handle students with special needs in a regular classroom setting. General education teachers often insist, “I’m not trained to handle her behavior and other disabilities. She needs to be in a special classroom with a teacher who knows how to deal with this type of child.” While students with behavior-related disabilities sometimes do need additional behavioral support, that does not preclude them from being able to meet high expectations for behavior. You’ll read more about supporting students with behavior-related disabilities in chapter four.

Clearly, and as we’ll discuss later in the chapter, low expectations are sometimes built on teachers’ perceptions of their *own* inability to handle a challenging situation. Other times they’re actually based – at some level – on compassion and sympathy for students. It is easy to understand and explain these factors, but it is equally important to resolve not to let them get in the way of high expectations.

The key to success, as Lee and Marlene Canter write, is that “you must believe that if students don’t behave, it’s because they’ve chosen not to, or don’t know how.”² To illustrate this point, the Canters point out that in almost any classroom, even one in which students are often disruptive, “[w]hen a stranger enters a classroom, students don’t know what to expect, and disruptions normally stop. Not knowing who the stranger is, or how he or she might respond to disruptive behavior, students choose to behave.” As the Canters argue, “If students choose to behave in one situation, surely they can be influenced to behave in other situations.”³

Consider the reflections of Molly Eigen (Rio Grande Valley ‘99), who taught a 9th-12th grade Math Resource class:

I was told, “Forget about it, he CAN’T behave. He has ADD, an anger disorder and aggressive tendencies.” At first, I had to agree. Luis was loud and explosive. He refused to do his work and often harassed me and other students. But, one day in a meeting with the principal and his mother, we called Luis in to talk about his behavior. I watched as he was polite, responsive, and extremely respectful to everyone in the room. I realized that Luis had just figured out that he didn’t have to behave at school, which teachers had been consistently reinforcing for years by allowing him to misbehave. I now knew that Luis

My first year, I let way too many misbehaviors go unchecked, because I made excuses for why the kids behaved as they did – excuses based on their home life, their previous teachers, and many other factors. As soon as I switched to a “no excuses” mentality – for my students and for myself – I had a much happier class, because kids weren’t in constant struggle with each other and with me, and because they knew the expectations they had to live up to.

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² Ibid 21.

³ Ibid 21.

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could behave if he wanted to, so I had to make him want to behave. I did several things. First, I made it easier for him to behave: I gave him more frequent attention and assistance, I sat him near me, I allowed him to have breaks, and I constantly gave him very clear directions and parameters of what was appropriate behavior for each activity we did. Then, I made it worthwhile for him to behave: I created an individual reward system and gave him frequent praise for good behavior. And finally, I made it unpleasant for him not to behave: I worked closely with his mother and coach to create a consequence system that included being grounded at home, taking away his video games and not letting him go to football practice. After a year of consistently keeping up with these systems, Luis had exceptionally good behavior and with that I saw his learning skyrocket. Now he could pay attention, focus and follow through on assignments. He was in class instead of suspended, and he was a happier student.

The teacher's job, then, is to provide a structure that encourages students who *can* behave to do so. As Molly noted in her story, Luis was choosing not to behave, so she developed strategies to encourage him to make better choices. But she also realized that Luis needed clearer instruction about what was expected of him, and she ended up coaching him through the process of taking responsibility for his attitude and his learning. While not all students will require such specific attention, teachers are always well served by thinking through the many ways in which they can help students rise to the classroom's expectations. It is a matter of figuring out what factors you can influence to spur excellent behavior, which – as in Luis's situation – can then lead to much stronger academic success.

Earlier, we alluded to the fact that low expectations for student behavior are sometimes built on teachers' perceptions of *their own inability* to handle a challenging situation. Indeed, a teacher who claims, "This class is just too rowdy for me to control," or "I can't handle this student's emotional outbursts," are, deep down, doubting their own ability to provide a structured environment.

The Canters assert, "The major roadblock to successful classroom management is a teacher's own negative expectations about her ability to deal with disruptive student behavior."⁴ Just as teachers need to have high expectations for their students' potential to behave appropriately, teachers need to have high expectations for their own ability to assertively establish and reinforce concrete expectations for student behavior. In the next section, we will help you ensure appropriately high expectations for yourself and give you specific strategies for asserting your authority in an effective manner.

II. Holding High Expectations for Yourself: Asserting Your Authority

If you are like most new teachers, you probably have some anxiety about what it will be like to be the leader of a classroom. Will students really see you as "in charge"? What if they don't? How do you ensure that they will? How will you most effectively use that authority to reinforce your high expectations for student behavior, and to create a community of academic achievement in your classroom? Understandably, many new teachers are just as concerned about whether they will present themselves effectively and whether students will respond to them appropriately as they are about how to deliver instruction.

Over our 20 years of preparing corps members for their classrooms, we have learned that new teachers need to put considerable energy into ensuring they have high expectations for themselves and into thinking about how they will assert their authority in a firm, but positive way in their classrooms.

⁴ Ibid 17.

Teachers who accept and effectively use the authority that comes with their position as the instructional leader of the classroom are those who are able to most influence student achievement.

In considering your own approach to asserting your authority in the classroom, there are two basic premises to keep in mind. First, as the teacher, you are in fact in charge of and responsible for what happens in the classroom. You must recognize this and be mentally prepared to accept responsibility for everything that happens in your classroom. Second, there are more and less effective ways a teacher might exercise his or her authority. We will address each of these points in turn.

(1) You are in charge of and responsible for what happens in your classroom. Your authority as the instructional leader of a classroom is not something you must seek out. Rather, it is something that is a fundamental component of a teacher's role. Like it or not (and most teachers would probably say they have felt both emotions), you are the authority in your classroom, and you have to think strategically about how you use that authority. Without a doubt, you have the unquestionable right and responsibility to administer consequences and positive reinforcement that will encourage helpful behaviors and stop harmful ones.

When beginning teachers struggle with classroom management, it is often because they ignore unacceptable behavior, worrying that they'll upset or annoy students by enforcing rules. Or they'll ignore certain students, deciding to concentrate their efforts on the half of the class that "wants to learn." It is your job to set and enforce rules so that *all* of your students can concentrate on academic achievement. Even in classrooms run in a more "democratic" manner, where students help to formulate the rules, the teacher still assumes ultimate responsibility for the conduct of his or her students.

(2) The most effective teachers assert their authority with students in a firm and positive manner. Good teachers are neither meek nor hostile; they are neither a student's best friend nor the class's tyrant. Instead, effective teachers are those who maintain their students' dignity by asserting their authority evenly, calmly, and predictably.

By "asserting authority," we do not mean yelling at your students. You can be both respectful and assertive. Asserting your authority means standing firm on your expectations. It means approaching every interaction with every student in a well-considered, pre-determined way, so that you can calmly and efficiently handle any situation that arises. As the Canters explain, the key to effective assertion of authority is to clearly and confidently make your expectations for student behavior known and to consistently follow through with your stated consequences. The Canters call this highly effective approach "assertive responsiveness":

When a teacher responds assertively, he tells students exactly what behavior is acceptable and what is unacceptable, what will happen when the student chooses to behave and what will happen when the student chooses not to behave. No questions. No room for confusion.⁵

Of all the teachers I work with, the ones who are most successful are those who do not engage in battles with students, those who refuse to direct anger towards students, those who are consistent with behavioral expectations but execute their systems without humiliating children, yelling, or taking away a small person's power. It absolutely takes consistency and fairness, but I have seen students become empowered and focused on learning because their teacher has given them nothing to fight about.

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⁵ Ibid 27.

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It may help to see the utility of this approach by considering its alternatives. At one end of the spectrum are new teachers who – often due to well-intentioned kindness – are inconsistent and permissive when it comes to their rules and consequences. These teachers often find themselves thinking, “Well, Juan is whispering to his neighbor, but in general is doing such a better job today than he was yesterday...I won’t say anything and hope he stops quickly,” or “I shouldn’t tell her to stop chewing gum because then she’ll be in a bad mood.” The Canters call these types of reactions to misbehavior “nonassertive responses.” These practices undermine a teacher’s authority by giving students no means of predicting the results of their choices to behave or misbehave, a key component of their sense of safety.

At the other end of the spectrum are teachers who mistake their role as instructional leaders as a call for harshness and hostility. These teachers believe that the way to maintain authority is through students’ fear of the teacher’s reprisal. The Canters call these types of responses “hostile responses.” These teachers hear themselves saying, “Juan, stop talking *now*. Evidently you’re just not capable of keeping your mouth shut,” or “Spit your gum out. You now get to write ‘I will never chew gum in class again’ 500 times.” In the center of the spectrum are the teachers who realize their need to assert their authority in a fair, balanced and consistent manner.

Consider the following table of examples, adapted from *Assertive Discipline*:

Situation	Nonassertive Response	Assertive Response	Hostile Response
A student is disengaged from a lecture.	The teacher ignores it, thinking, “I’m just glad he’s not disrupting anything.”	Without stopping the lecture, the teacher walks back and stands near the student. The student reengages.	The teacher stops the lesson and says, “Hey, I’m not standing up here to hear myself talk. Wake up and pay attention. If you like staring out the window so much, I’ll have you stay in after class and you can stare out the window all you want.”
A student with a history of misbehavior is on-task, working well.	The teacher appreciates the fact in his mind, but doesn’t communicate that to the student in any way.	The teacher makes eye contact and nods in approval to the student. Later, as the class is leaving the teacher says, “You did a wonderful job working on that assignment today.”	The teacher says, “It’s about time you finally started working like a ninth-grader.”
Students are running in the classroom when you are trying to line up for lunch.	“Boys, how many times do I have to ask you to walk in the classroom? Now I’m tired of having to repeat myself. Next time, please try to act like third-graders, okay?”	The teacher calmly yet firmly states, “Kevin, Jerry, Jon, the rule is no running in the classroom. You know the consequence for that behavior is to be last in line. Now I want the three of you to stand at the end of the line—quietly and quickly. Thank you.	Clearly exasperated, the teacher says in a strident tone, “I’ve had it with you boys. I’ll see all of you after school.”

These examples paint a good picture of how effective teachers assert their authority in a given situation. You should not lose sight, however, of the fact that your authority is manifested in more than just your words. We'll discuss more of this in chapter five when we highlight the importance of maintaining a respectful tone, but recognize that facial expressions, body language and overall behavior also contribute to your students' perception of you as the authority figure. Thus, a key component of effectively asserting your authority is attending to how you *behave* as much as what you *say*. The following chart outlines the verbal and non-verbal characteristics of the nonassertive, assertive, and hostile teachers exemplified in the previous table:

Nonassertive Teacher	Assertive Teacher	Hostile Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses an indecisive tone; requests often sound more like a question and leave room for student refusal. • Implements consequences and rewards inconsistently. • Cannot model behavior, since student expectations for behavior are unclear. Body language may convey timidity and lack of confidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a firm, positive, respectful tone. • Applies consequences as outlined and delivers praise as expected. • Models how students are expected to behave (for example, during “silent time” the teacher is silent as well). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a harsh, disrespectful tone; shouts at students. • Administers consequences that are several degrees harsher than what is necessary, and positive reinforcement is given rarely and/or sarcastically. • Flaunts the fact that they are “above the rules.” Teacher brazenly chews gum, drinks soda, or engages in other activities from which students are prohibited. Body language may also be intimidating, cold or aloof.

Some teachers misinterpret “asserting authority” to mean that they must become someone other than themselves. In fact, teachers often find that using a voice or personality that doesn't come naturally to them backfires, as students realize that the teacher is faking. This insincerity may be perceived as a lack of confidence. The best thing you can do is think critically about your own personal strengths and how they mesh with your plan for asserting your authority. Certainly, all of us make adjustments to our natural persona when we are in front of a class teaching. However, your teaching will be most effective if you assert authority in a way that is compatible with your style and personality.

Be honest about your style, your weaknesses, and your strengths. Use what you know about yourself to develop your management style and don't try to force yourself to be something you are not. Students will be the first to let you know that you are not being yourself.

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To “assert authority” does not mean to “have a booming voice and lots of charisma.” We have witnessed many quiet-voiced, small-statured, unassuming new teachers take command of their classrooms, and we have seen socially aggressive, loud new teachers struggle to assert their authority. No one personality-type has a monopoly on asserting authority. The most important step in asserting your authority is not to change your personality, but rather to *decide* to assert your authority – to resolve to hold high expectations for yourself as the classroom leader. You must decide that you are in charge.

Of course, all teachers find their authority challenged at one point or another. Sometimes a student may explicitly challenge your authority to make or enforce a rule. Sometimes, that challenge comes from within as you struggle to fulfill your pledge to assert your authority through respectful and consistent application of rules and consequences. For example, the first time you find yourself verbally admonishing a

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contagiously smiling six-year old, your take-charge attitude might waver. Alternatively, the first time one of your adolescent students verbally assaults another student in your class, your commitment to be positive and respectful with your students at all times might seem naïve. Yet your ability to assert authority in a firm and positive manner is critical in situations such as these.

“Asserting authority” effectively is a matter of consistency and confidence. It means maintaining your students’ dignity, *not by relieving* them of consequences for their actions, but instead *by enforcing expectations through even and calm delivery of consequences*. It means enforcing expectations in a way that is consistent with your own personality and yet maintains your role as the leader of your classroom. While doing so is easier said than done, half the battle for most new teachers is simply recognizing that they need to be aware of how and when they are asserting their authority, especially in the foundational first days and weeks of school.

Building a Culture of Achievement

The Firm and Positive Approach

Theresa Noble (Miami '03) discovered that, if she wanted to create an environment where her students were respectful toward one another and excited to be in school, she would need to act the same way. She wrote this reflection five months into her first year of teaching:

My classroom culture has improved enormously. That is not to say that it is perfect now by any means. In fact, I think it has improved so much because it was so bad at first! In the beginning, I was so intent on being a serious, respected teacher that had control of her class that I forgot to be myself and relax sometimes. I became someone I never wanted to be in the classroom: I was snappy, rude, loud and intimidating. I realized this needed to change when I was sitting next to a retired teacher on my flight back to Miami from Christmas break with my family. I was tired and not looking forward to going back. The woman could sense this and she said, "First of all, you need to relax and stop expecting perfection. I was still learning my 35th year of teaching. The key to managing for me was to treat every child as if they were the most important person in the class. Find what works for you and don't pay attention to the teachers who think you should be yelling more." I started back with a calm, focused attitude and tried being polite for a change. It worked! My kids have responded so much more positively to a kind, respectful but firm teacher than they did when I was trying to be intimidating.

Conclusion and Key Concepts

- The self-fulfilling prophecy of high expectations holds true for behavior as well as academic achievement. In the same way that we hold high expectations for student achievement, we must hold **high expectations for student behavior**. Expecting your students to behave a certain way – and making those expectations clear to them – goes a long way toward shaping their behavior.
- We must hold our high expectations for behavior in spite of **common misperceptions about the inevitability of behavior problems**. There are a whole host of factors that, unless we are diligent, lead us toward misperceptions about our students – that they can't behave, or that their lives are so difficult we should not expect too much of them. In the overwhelming majority of instances, students' emotional problems, inadequate parenting, poverty, and special needs simply *do not* make good, productive behavior out of reach. Of course, having high expectations for student behavior does not, in any way, mean that a teacher loses sight of the realities of the students' lives.

- You will need to think carefully about how you will **assert your authority** in a firm and positive way in your new classroom. You are responsible for, and in charge of, what happens in your classroom. You can most effectively assert that authority by interacting with students in a predictable, fair, and balanced manner.



We thank Mark Pett, Delta '94, for allowing us to include some of his cartoons. See more of Mark's work at <http://www.markpett.com>.