

## Keep Learning Going During Holiday & Vacation Times

Adapted from *Responsive*™ blog posts by Mike Anderson and Margaret Wilson

Suddenly, it seems like the class is falling apart. Classroom routines that were going smoothly just a few weeks ago now seem rough around the edges. More and more children are forgetting to follow classroom rules. The noise level is higher, and academic productivity seems lower. What's going on?



In the weeks leading up to winter vacation, what you're seeing may well be a case of the holiday season jitters. From November through January, children often become more fidgety, giggly, testy, and tired. There are many reasons: they may be distracted by the excitement of home activities, or they may be reacting to increased stress at home. At school, schedules are often disrupted at this time of year by assemblies, plays, and special events, and such changes in routine can throw children's behavior off. Plus, at many schools, recess is curtailed once winter weather arrives.

What can you do to help your students stay on track and learn at their best during this season? We've found that an extra measure of calmness, consistency, and structure can work wonders. Here are some strategies you might want to try.

### Stick to Routines

As much as you can, stick to the routines that you've established to shape the school day. For instance, if a daily **Morning Meeting** is part of your routine, you may find it's even more helpful now. Starting off each day with Morning Meeting helps students make the transition to school through a welcoming experience that reinforces expectations for behavior and builds enthusiasm for the learning day ahead.

You can use each of the four components of Morning Meeting strategically to help get the school day off to a good start. For instance, choose a calm greeting (such as a simple "Hello" passed around the circle) to settle the group if they seem especially bouncy coming in the door. Or use seasonally-themed sharing topics to help students learn more about

each other. Choose sharing questions that every student in your class can answer comfortably. For example, questions such as *What do you especially love about winter?* or *Do you enjoy any special holiday foods?* Don't exclude children who don't have vacation plans or who don't celebrate holidays at home.

When the inevitable deviations in routine do come up, let the children know in advance what to expect and reassure them that things will get back to normal. Remember that students learn by observing you: by handling schedule changes with good-natured calm and flexibility, you model that behavior for students.

## **Notice and Reinforce Success**

Look for opportunities to remark on children's success in meeting classroom expectations. By giving children genuine information about their competence, you can prevent many behavior problems.

A few tips for noticing positive behavior and using **reinforcing language** effectively:

- Commend behavior you've actually seen, not behavior you hope to see. Saying, *"Thank you for waiting for your turn to speak"* sends a confusing message to a group that's busy interrupting each other. Instead, try a direct reminder: *"Everyone, remember that we've agreed to wait our turn before speaking."*
- Be specific, describing the behavior you want to commend in detail and explaining why it's helpful. For instance, *"I saw classmates helping each other wipe off tables after snack. That really fits our classroom rule that says 'Take care of each other.'"*
- Use positive words that do not single out any one child. For instance, *"Lots of people lined up quickly today and waited quietly with hands and bodies under control. That gives us more time on the playground!"*

## **Revisit Hopes, Dreams, and Classroom Rules**

Any time children are going off track is a good time to review behavioral expectations. When planning such reviews, it's tempting to think about what the children "should" be able to do by now (*It's December—they should know how to sit quietly for sharing!*). But it's much more productive to keep your focus on what the children *can* do right now and what they need from you to help them do better.

Many teachers devote time around winter vacation to having students revisit the hopes and goals they chose for themselves at the beginning of the school year. Teachers guide

students in considering how they've progressed on achieving their goals. Should they make adjustments? Is it time to choose a new goal? (If your students didn't name personal learning goals at the beginning of the year, it's not too late to do so. This season, with its focus on fresh starts and resolutions, provides a natural opportunity.)

The *Responsive Classroom* approach to creating classroom rules is grounded in the idea that classroom rules help everyone meet their learning goals. So, after students revisit their personal goals, the next step is to reflect on the rules. Are they working? Do they need any changes? You might have the children rate how they've been doing with rule-following lately and then share your own observations. Be sure to acknowledge that it's okay to need a brush-up; we all forget the rules sometimes, especially when we're stressed or excited.

### **Keep Expectations High but Appropriate**

Appreciate the extra energy your students may have during holidays or other exciting times and anticipate that they'll need to expend some of that energy. Although students will benefit from periods of calm, it's unrealistic to expect them to be quiet for long periods. Working in some talk and movement throughout the day helps children stay calm enough to learn. Some ideas:

- Plan for partner chats or "turn and talk" periods.
- Alternate active periods, such as science time, with more quiet periods, such as reading or writing.
- Weave in **energizers** to give children breaks without getting them too revved up. For example, you could play "Mirrors," where students silently mirror or copy your movements, or sing a peaceful song together, gradually removing words so that everyone is quietly humming by the end.

### **Read Aloud**

Engaging read-alouds can really help children focus and calm themselves. Look for extra opportunities to read aloud, just for a few minutes. Vary your selections among picture books, chapter books, and nonfiction books. Read from joke, riddle, and poetry books when you have an extra moment in the circle or while the children are lining up.

Gauge the children's energy level before choosing a reading. Choose a beautiful picture book or a quiet but moving story for times when you want to create a more calm atmosphere. Select stories that are especially inspiring, thought-provoking, or suspenseful if the class feels scattered and you want to bring them back together.

### **Keep the Learning Going**

It's natural for children's behavior to veer a bit off track during exciting or stressful times.

During such times, observe your students, hold them firmly but kindly to classroom expectations, and make a few simple adjustments in your teaching practice. You can keep learning going while helping the children meet the challenges or enjoy the fun of the season.



**Grade**

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