Managing children positively

Carol Read recommends the seven 'R's in the young learner classroom.

The main aim of managing children positively is to create and maintain a happy working environment in which the norms and rules of classroom behaviour are respected and children are engaged in purposeful activity and feel secure and motivated to learn. Maintaining a balance between children's enjoyment and acceptable behaviour is often one of the greatest challenges primary language teachers face.

Many ET*p* readers who teach children will instantly recognise this challenge. However, even if you don't teach young learners, it is useful to bear in mind the factors that impinge on managing any group of learners positively, whatever their age. As you read this article about managing children positively, you may also like to consider in what ways the different points may apply to older learners too.

Start as you mean to go on

When you start teaching a class of children for the first time, it is essential to establish clear parameters for working together. By this I mean actively seeking to create a positive relationship with the children and to set up a framework of norms for *'the way we are and the way we do things in our classroom'* in which you and the children can work together harmoniously. First of all, you need to have a clear idea of how you would ideally like things to be in your classroom and then work systematically and persistently towards achieving this. It is unlikely to just happen if left to chance.

The best moment to embark on establishing parameters for working together is as soon as you meet a new class. This initial time is sometimes referred to as a 'honeymoon period' and gives you a golden opportunity to establish patterns of how you want and expect things to be. It is important to make the most of this time, as it is always much harder later on to change patterns which have already been set.

During the first few weeks of lessons, the children will be getting to know you and will be willing to respect you, like you and do things your way. They will also, naturally and understandably, be testing your limits, checking out what they can and can't get away with and possibly also, either unconsciously or deliberately, provoking your reactions in order to see what you will do. It is, therefore, crucial to take planned initiatives during this time in order to establish a healthy and happy working environment, including clearly understood boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

The exact nature and details of the working parameters that you establish will vary according to factors such as your own background, beliefs and experience of teaching and learning, the age of the children, the size of the class and the educational and cultural context in which you are working. In strategically planning how to establish your ideal working parameters with a new class, it is very helpful to consider the seven 'R's.

The seven 'R's

The seven 'R's are Relationships, Rules, Routines, Rights, Responsibilities, Respect and Rewards. Together they provide an integrated framework for establishing clear working parameters with the children you teach. In the case of each 'R', you need to consider possible options and then plan clear goals, together with the approach and/or strategies you will use to realise these in class.

Relationships

The relationships that you establish with the class as a whole, and with the individuals that make up each class, lie at the heart of establishing a healthy and happy working environment and managing children positively. In a small-scale survey I conducted with children between the ages of six and eleven in Spain, *What makes a teacher special for you?**, children most frequently identified qualities of good teaching that reflected their relationship with the teacher. These included someone who is fair, patient, caring, affectionate, kind, funny, listens to you, helps you, makes you work, treats you as a 'person', tells you off, if necessary, but doesn't get angry or shout. These qualities, identified by children themselves, provide a useful basis for thinking about the kind of relationships you intend to establish with your classes. Although every teacher has their own unique personality and 'teaching persona' and will go about establishing relationships in different ways, the following general points help in getting off to a positive start:

- Learn the children's names as soon as you can and always use them.

- Avoid having favourites (or at least make sure that this doesn't show).

- Listen to what the children have to say (if a child wants to tell you something at an inappropriate moment, postpone till later but don't then forget, as this will give the message that you're not really interested).

- Challenge the children appropriately and encourage them to believe that they can succeed.

- Be patient if you need to explain or give instructions more than once.

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- Create time for personalised moments in which you convey that you know and care about each child as an individual. This may be, for example, at the start or end of lessons, before or after formal teaching begins or while children are working individually.

- Model the behaviour that you would like the children to adopt. For example, be polite and courteous, use *please* and *thank you* when you ask them to do things, smile and greet them whether in or out of the classroom.

- Use praise appropriately to provide feedback and encourage participation and effort.

- Use inclusive language, eg *Let's ... Today we're going to ...* etc.

- Use humour and show a sense of fun.

- Be fair and firm about enforcing rules and insisting on children's adherence to classroom norms.

- Keep calm at all times if possible; try not to raise your voice or shout.

- If you tell a child off, make it clear it's their behaviour that you don't like, not them.

- Be consistent. If you say that you or the class will do something, make sure it happens.

- Mark and return work promptly. Be constructive in your comments and respond to children's intended meanings, rather than just language accuracy or spelling.

As you develop your relationship with different classes and children, it is a good idea to get into the habit of monitoring yourself and how things are going. Through reflection and analysis of your own behaviour, you will be able to identify aspects of this that make your relationships work better and produce a more positive response in the children.

Rules

Rules may either be imposed by the institution or established as part of your working parameters. It is usually best to have as few rules as possible and to make sure that the rules themselves, eg *'We must put up our hands if we want to speak'*, as well as the reasons for the rules, eg *'If we all talk at once, no one listens to what we have to say'*, are clear to everybody.

> *The most effective rules are those which are expressed using inclusive language and for which the children feel ownership*

It is important that any rules you establish are perceived as fair by the children and that you can actually enforce them. For example, a rule which states *'We must always speak English in class'* may, at some moments, be perceived as unfair by the children if, for example, they have something they desperately need to say. It may also at times be neither desirable nor possible for you to enforce. In this case, a communication rule formulated differently, eg *'We must ask if we need to speak Spanish. (May I speak Spanish, please?)'* may be more effective. This version of the rule will not only establish English as the main language of communication in the classroom, but will also encourage the children to think twice before giving you a signal that they need to resort to their mother tongue.

The most effective rules are those which are expressed using inclusive language (*our* rules for *our* classroom) and for which the children feel ownership. It also helps when rules can be expressed positively rather than negatively in order to highlight desired behaviour. For example, in a rule such as *'We mustn't shout in our classroom'*, the immediate association is to think of shouting, whereas if it is expressed positively, eg *'We must talk quietly in our classroom'*, the same rule is more likely to work to better effect.

The best way to establish rules as part of your working parameters is to involve the children in decisions about which ones will apply. Depending on the age and level of the children, the procedure you use to do this can vary from, for example, talking about the reasons and importance of key rules with the children and getting them to illustrate these for display on the classroom notice board, to a more

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►►► genuinely open negotiation about rules, leading to a class contract signed by both the children and yourself.

Routines

Routines are established patterns of behaviour in which everyone knows what is expected of them and what they should do. The introduction of classroom routines is instrumental in setting up working parameters which function effectively. It is vital that routines are established during the 'honeymoon period' before patterns of behaviour are set. In order to introduce and establish routines successfully, you need to have a clear plan of the areas these will cover and the form they will take. For example, you may like to think of routines for such things as:

- greeting the children
- taking the register
- starting lessons
- getting into pairs or groups
- moving from one part of the classroom to another
- doing particular activities, eg those involving movement or stories
- getting the children's attention
- starting and stopping activities
- giving out and collecting in materials
- looking at and/or correcting children's work
- collecting in and returning homework
- going to the toilet
- tidying up
- ending lessons

Familiar routines help to make children feel secure and confident in the classroom. They promote cooperation as, for example, when we all help tidy up together. They also foster a sense of community and belonging, in the sense that we all know and share the way we work and do things together in the classroom. As children become increasingly familiar with routines and what is expected of them at different stages of learning, they act with greater autonomy. This helps you to manage your classes positively. It also helps save your energy and voice (highly important if you are teaching full-time) as, in some areas at least, once routines are established, children will only need a prompt to know what to do.

Rights and responsibilities

Rights and responsibilities are often two sides of the same coin. Here are some examples from the children's perspective:

- If you have the *right* to join in the lesson, then you also have the *responsibility* to remember to bring your books.

- If you have the *right* to speak in the classroom and have others listen to you, then you also have the *responsibility* to listen to others when they do the same.

- If you have the *right* to use the classroom scissors, crayons and glue, then you also have the *responsibility* to share them with others when they need to use them as well.

- If you have the *right* to have a turn in games, then you also have the *responsibility* to respect the turns of others when they play.

- If you have the *right* to see the pictures when the teacher tells a story, then you also have the *responsibility* not to block the view of others.

- If you have the *right* not to be mocked or laughed at, then you also have the *responsibility* not to mock or laugh at others.

Although it is unlikely to be appropriate to talk about rights and responsibilities explicitly with children, it is important to model through your own behaviour the way you value these. For example, with responsibilities, if a child constantly forgets their book, it may be necessary for the teacher to issue frequent reminders and reprimands. However, what typically happens is that on the one day the child remembers to bring their book, the teacher may well not comment at all. If you wish to positively reinforce the child's sense of responsibility in this area, then you need to show explicitly that you value this. A quiet word of praise, eg *Well done for remembering your book today, Juan!* is much more likely to reinforce the behaviour you want than saying nothing, which may leave the child wondering why he bothered to bring his book anyway or whether you even noticed or cared.

Similarly with children's rights, it is important to show through your behaviour that you value these and are willing to protect them. If, for example, a child mocks or laughs at another child in the class, you need to make it clear that this behaviour is completely unacceptable. In this case, it may be also be worth explicitly discussing the reasons for this, possibly in a private moment after the class, and inviting the child to consider the situation from the

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other child's point of view by asking how they would feel if the same happened to them. In encouraging children to reflect on their behaviour and see things from someone else's point of view, they are more likely to act towards others in a responsible way.
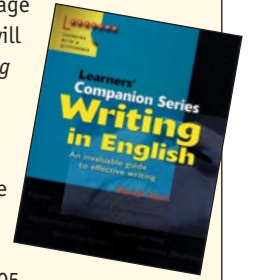
Respect

Respect is the glue which underpins and holds together all the other 'R's. Respect cannot be taught explicitly, but it can be modelled in all your behaviour, such as using the children's names, being polite, respecting personal space, valuing diversity, recognising that children contribute and participate in different ways and understanding that they have feelings and 'off days' just like you. The most important thing about fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect as part of managing children positively is to remember that respect works two ways.

If the children feel that you respect and treat them like individuals rather than a class to control, they will also respect and respond to you as individuals, rather than with a collective group mentality which is always much harder to manage positively.

Rewards

It is usually best not to use any system of extrinsic rewards to raise motivation levels and/or ensure good behaviour, at least at the outset. This gives a positive message that you expect everything to go well. However, there may be times with some classes when introducing a reward system can be an effective way to reinforce appropriate behaviour and/or to add an additional, motivational, feel-good factor to things that are already going well.

Reward systems can be devised in all kinds of different enjoyable ways, eg using stars, stickers, points, smiley faces, raffle tickets or marbles in a jar. If used effectively, they can help promote collaboration, appropriate behaviour and individual as well as class effort. However, if used without care, they may also have the opposite effect and create a divisive atmosphere of 'winners' and 'losers', in which some children become obsessed by collecting stars or points, or whatever it is, while others adopt a strategy of opting out, which has a correspondingly negative effect on their motivation, effort and behaviour in class.

The kinds of reward systems which generally work most effectively are ones which are designed to involve each child working cooperatively for a prize or pay-off which will be won by the whole class. For example, in the case of collecting marbles in a jar, individual children, pairs or groups may be awarded marbles during lessons for such things as working well, making an effort to speak English, helping others, completing their work carefully or whatever you decide. As soon as the jar is filled with marbles, the whole class gets a reward. This may be something as simple as watching a favourite video, having a quiz, playing a favourite game or whatever else you and the children choose. The jar for the marbles should not be too big, so that the reward is attainable over a reasonably short period of time, for example a week or, maximum, two. If it takes a whole term (a long time in the life of a child!) to fill

up the jar and earn the reward, then they are likely to lose interest and enthusiasm. Giving a reward is best done instantly as an ongoing part of your teaching, so that the association between the reward and the reason for it is always fresh in the children's mind, eg *'Great work, Daniel and Antonio. I only heard English in the game! Two marbles in the jar for you!'*

The effect of individuals collecting rewards for the benefit of the whole class creates an atmosphere in which there is positive peer pressure to make an effort, work well and produce appropriate behaviour. A collaborative reward system like this can also be made fun by your challenging the class, eg *'Can you fill the jar by Friday? I don't think so! Show me I'm wrong!'*

If you do decide to use a reward system such as the one described above, it is a good idea to vary the system you use for accumulating rewards (marbles, raffle tickets, stars, etc) regularly, as, if you always use the same one, it is likely after a while to lose its associations of pleasant expectation, surprise and fun. It is also essential always to use reward systems in the positive way in which they are intended, ie as *rewards*, rather than negatively or punitively, for example, by taking or threatening to take marbles back out of the jar once they have been awarded.

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In conclusion, the seven 'R's provide an integrated framework for thinking about ways of managing children positively and creating a happy working environment in which teaching and learning take place in an effective and harmonious way. ETp

*An unpublished survey of 120 primary school children carried out in Spanish in January 2000 at Arturo Soria School, Madrid, with the help of my colleague, Ana Soberón

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