

CREATING POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS THROUGH CLASS MEETINGS

The effectiveness of a positive approach depends on adult attitudes of mutual respect and concern for the long-range effects of interactions in the school environment on students. Family and class meetings provide the best possible circumstances for adults and students to learn cooperation, mutual respect, responsibility, and social skills. These are the important long-range goals that inspire many parents and teachers to try class and family meetings, but here are many more immediate fringe benefits.

Teachers, for example, are relieved to get out of the roles of policeman, judge, jury, and executioner when problems occur. Whenever students come with problems, teachers can simply request that the problems be put on the class meeting agenda. This alone is enough of an immediate solution to give the student satisfaction, while providing for a cooling-off period before trying to solve the problem.

Students are often able to solve problems much better than the teacher. They have many excellent ideas when they are allowed and encouraged to express them. Teachers are frequently amazed at the academic and social skills students learn in class meetings. Because the students are intensively involved in solving problems that are so relevant for them, they learn listening skills, language development, extended thinking, logical consequences of behavior, memory skills, and objective thinking about the value and mechanics of learning.

Teachers find that students are much more willing to cooperate when they have been involved in the decisions, even when the final solution is one that has been suggested by the teacher many times in the past to no avail.

Before outlining things to do in order to have a successful class meeting, we will look at some attitudes and actions to avoid:

1. Do not use the class meeting as another platform for lecturing and moralizing. It is essential to be as objective and nonjudgmental as possible. This does not mean you cannot have input into the meetings. You can still put items on the agenda and give your opinion and have an equal vote.
2. Do not use the class meeting as a guise to continue excessive control. Students see through this approach and will not cooperate.

Class meetings should be held every day (or at least three times a week). If class meetings are not held often enough, students will be discouraged from putting items on the agenda, because it will take too long to get to them. A cooling-off period of a few hours or days is recommended before discussing a problem. However, it is discouraging to have to wait much longer than three days. (A shorter cooling-off period is recommended for younger students. In kindergarten, one hour is often long enough).

Final decisions are made by a majority vote. This does not cause feelings of division in a class meeting when a positive atmosphere has been created. It provides a great opportunity for students to learn that everyone doesn't think and feel the same way they do. Students also learn that it is impossible to have everyone agree, but they can still cooperate.

Several ideas must be explained and discussed with students before actual agenda items are dealt with. During the first meeting, get the students involved as much as possible while teaching them the purposes of class meetings, the importance of mutual respect, how to give compliments, how to solve problems with logical consequences, the Three Rs of Logical Consequences, how to use the agenda, and the importance of a cooling-off period.

Purposes of Class Meetings: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To give compliments2. To help each other3. To solve problems4. To plan events	The 3 Rs of Logical Consequences: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Related2. Respectful3. Reasonable
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Many Teachers start every meeting by asking the students, "What are the two main purposes of class meetings?" The two main purposes are to help each other and to solve problems.

SOME OF THE GOALS OF CLASS MEETINGS

Teaching Mutual Respect

Teach students the meaning of mutual respect by having a discussion of the following questions:

1. Why is it disrespectful when more than one person talks at the same time? (We can't hear what everyone is saying. The person who is supposed to be talking feels others don't care, and so on.)
2. Why is it disrespectful to disturb others? (They can't concentrate and learn from what is going on.)
3. Why is it important to raise your hand before speaking in a large group? (To achieve order and remember whose turn it is.)
4. Why is it important to listen when others are speaking? (So that we can learn from each other, to show respect for each other, and because we like to have others listen to us.)

Giving Compliments

Spend some time with students exploring the meaning of compliments. This can be done informally during the first meeting. Compliments should consist of acknowledgment of others in the following areas:

- Accomplishments
- Helpfulness
- Sharing

Have students brainstorm for specific examples in each of these areas. Then teach them to use the words, “I would like to compliment (*a person’s name*) for (*something specific that person did.*)” Using these words helps students stay on the task of recognizing what others do, rather than what they wear. In classrooms where the prescribed phrasing is not used, the compliments tend to be less specific and more superficial.

At first many students might say, “I would like to compliment Jill for being my friend.” Let this go for a while during the learning process, but eventually the group could again brainstorm on how to be specific about what a friend *does* that we would like to recognize and appreciate.

The teacher may start by giving several compliments (from notes taken during the day, when noticing things students did that would merit recognition). Many teachers model giving compliments every day, making sure they eventually cover every student in their classroom, a few each day.

During the first meeting, have everyone give at least one compliment to make sure they know how to do it. If anyone has difficulty, have the class help by asking if anyone has any ideas on something that happened to this student during the day that he could compliment someone for, like playing with him during recess. After this, compliments can be optional.

It is also a good idea to teach students to say thank you after receiving a compliment. You may have several class meetings just for compliments while the students learn this process.

Many teachers have shared that compliments alone have been significant in creating a more positive atmosphere in their classrooms. After the initial awkwardness, students love looking for, giving, and receiving positive recognition. *Where else do they get this valuable training?*

Teaching Logical Consequences

Teach the students to use logical consequences before trying to solve any problems. Start by having them brainstorm regarding natural consequences by asking what happens in the following circumstances if no one interferes:

- If you stand in the rain? (You get wet.)
- If you play on the freeway? (You might get killed.)
- If you don’t sleep? (You get tired.)
- If you don’t eat? (You get hungry.)

Next explain that logical consequences are things that can be done to help others learn to be responsible for their behavior, when it is not appropriate to let them experience a natural consequence. Explain the Three Rs of Logical Consequences. Logical consequences must be 1) related, 2) respectful and 3) reasonable. It is a good idea to make a poster of the Three Rs for reference in the classroom. Have students brainstorm and discuss logical consequences for the following problems:

- Someone who writes on the desk
- Someone who rides the tether ball
- Someone who doesn't do their work during class time
- Someone who is late for school

It is much easier to give the students practice by working on hypothetical situations, so that there is a lack of emotional involvement and blame. After receiving as many suggestions as possible, go over each one and have the students see how well they fit the criteria for the Three Rs for Logical Consequences. Have them discuss their reasons why they think each suggestion is or isn't *related, respectful, reasonable*. Also have them discuss whether each suggestion will be helpful to the person, or will it be hurtful? Have the class decide which suggestions should be eliminated because they do not meet the guidelines of the Three Rs or because they are in some other way hurtful.

When any of the Three Rs of Logical Consequences are not present, the Three Rs of Punishment will likely sabotage the teacher's efforts to make class meetings and effective methods of teaching responsibility, mutual respect, and how to cooperate. These side effects of punishment are:

1. Resentment ("This is unfair. I can't trust adults or my peers.")
2. Revenge ("They are winning now, but I'll get even")
3. Retreat, in the form of rebellion ("They won't catch me again." "I don't care about them,") or reduced self-esteem ("I am a bad person.")

THE HOW-TOS OF CLASS MEETINGS

Using the Agenda

Introduce the agenda to the group. Some teachers reserve space on the blackboard. Others keep a sheet of paper on a clipboard where it is easily accessible.

Explain to the students that you are going to teach them to solve problems rather than trying to solve all of them by yourself. From now on, instead of coming to you with problems, they can put their name on the agenda, followed by a few words to help them remember what the problems are about. Warn them that at first they may forget and still come to you for solutions, but you will remind them to put it on the agenda. Eventually they will stop coming to you for solutions and will remember to put problems on the agenda. These problems will then be solved during the class meetings. Students often come up with better solutions than teachers and parents and are then willing to cooperate because they were involved in the decision. When solutions do not seem to work, simply put the problem back on the agenda for more discussion and problem solving in a cooperative

atmosphere. When you yourself put items on the agenda, be sure to *own* the problem, rather than trying to place blame. Students feel good about helping you with your problem. The items on the agenda are to be covered in chronological order in the amount of time allotted. Any problem that is not finished before the end of the meeting will be continued the next day.

Quite often, by the time an agenda item comes up for discussion, the person who put it on the agenda will say that it has already been taken care of. Some adults say, “Fine,” and go on to the next item. Others ask the student if she would like to share the solution.

Using the Cooling-Off Period

Explain why problems can't be solved when people are upset. With older students you can ask them why. With younger students, explain that the purpose of waiting a few hours or a few days before solving problems on the agenda is to give people a chance to cool off and calm down so that problems can be solved respectfully.

Meeting in a Circle

It is important that students sit in a circle for class meetings. Remaining at their desks not only creates physical barriers, which retard the process, but I have yet to see a class meeting where students could keep from fidgeting with items in or on their desk while remaining at their desks.

Take time to train students to move their desks with as little noise and confusion as possible. Some classes spend several days practicing. I have seen every kind of desk moved from all kinds of arrangements so that students could sit in a circle facing each other. The shortest time was fifteen seconds. Most can do it in thirty to forty-five seconds. Many classes take pride in their efficient desk moving with reinforcement.

Training can involve several steps. First you might ask the students what they think they need to do to move with as little noise and confusion as possible. They will usually come up with all the things necessary for a smooth transition. Then ask them how many times they think they will need to practice before they can implement their good ideas.

Some teachers like to assign seats. On the first day they have one student at a time move his or her desk and put the chair into the assigned space. Other teachers have a few move at a time, by row or by team. If they are noisy and disruptive, have them practice until they solve the problems. Once they have learned to do it quietly, they can move at once.

Class-Meeting Structure

The steps listed below were developed by Frank Medder and are helpful guidelines teachers can use for successful class meetings. Without these steps, many class meetings fail because there is not enough structure. Without structure, students are not immediately impressed with what the teacher is trying to accomplish and will become disruptive. The teacher then “gives up,” commenting to the student, “Well, obviously you don't want a class meeting now. We'll try again later when you are ready.” In other words, without adequate structure, the teacher ends up blaming the students rather than effectively managing the procedure.

1. Begin with compliments. Students who want to give someone a compliment will raise their hand and the teacher or student leader should go around the circle and call on everyone who has raised a hand. Go around the circle once and call on everyone who has a hand raised. Go around the circle once and call on everyone who has a hand raised. When going around the circle it is important to start and stop at the same place. This avoids the accusations of “unfair” when a teacher calls on students at random and arbitrarily chooses when to stop. There is always one who claims he didn’t get called on. Some teachers have their students pass a pencil or a beanbag, instead of raising their hands. The person who has the object in his hands may either speak or pass it on.
2. Read the first item on the agenda. Ask the person who wrote the item if it is still a problem. If she says no, go on to the next item. If another person is involved, ask her to explain her side of the story.
3. Ask the person who has been “accused” if she has a suggestion for a solution. If she does, ask the group to vote on her suggestion. If the majority vote agrees with the suggestion, go on to the next item.
4. If a solution is not suggested or if the majority vote does not go along with the suggestion, go around the circle twice for comments and suggestions. Start with the person who wrote the item on the agenda and end just before this person after going around the circle twice.
5. Write down every suggestion exactly as it is given. You will find suggestions on what to do if students are being hurtful rather than helpful (by suggesting true logical consequences) under “Common Questions” at the end of this article.
6. Read all the suggestions before asking for a vote. Instruct students to vote for only one suggestion. Read the suggestions again one at a time and write down the number of people voting for each suggestion.
7. When the final vote is in, if the vote entails a logical consequence, ask the person for whom the solution was suggested when he would like to do it and give two possibilities to choose from, such as today or tomorrow, or during recess or after school. There is some psychological benefit in giving students a choice of when they would like to complete the consequence. It gives them a sense of positive power and commitment.

This method provides a process that can be followed step by step. However, it is not so rigid as to eliminate room for teacher individuality and creativity. Some teachers do not feel comfortable with a majority vote. After all the suggestions are in, they ask the student whose behavior is of concern which suggestion he or she thinks would be the most helpful. These teachers claim that the student usually chooses the most logical, even when it is not necessarily the easiest. Other teachers say this does not work for them, because their students choose the easiest and it does not seem to help change the behavior.

After observing a class meeting where a student was asked to apologize in front of the class for a misbehavior that was put on the agenda, one adult objected. She felt it was humiliating for the student. When the teacher then invited her to ask the student and other members of the class if it bothered them to apologize in front of everyone. The class unanimously agreed that it did not bother them. It is important for each teacher to be aware of the student's developmental levels and comfort with various consequences, rather than assuming all students and groups respond similarly.

Teacher Skills

We have discussed many of the skills students need to learn for successful class meetings. There are several teacher skills that greatly enhance class meetings. It is most important to model what you are hoping the students will learn mutual respect and cooperation. Teachers **should model courtesy statements**, such as *please, thank you, you are welcome*, and so on.

One of the most important skills that both models mutual respect and allows students to develop their capabilities is **open-ended questioning**. Any statement you might like to make can be put in the form of a question. If you want to let students know you think they are being too noisy, ask, "How many think it is getting too noisy in here?" It is especially effective if you ask the question both ways. If you ask how many think it is okay, also ask how many think it is not okay. The less you let your own biases show, the more you allow students to think. It is amazing how often students come up with the same kind of lecturing and moralizing statements they reject when they are spoken by an adult.

Open-ended questions can change an atmosphere from negative to positive, as in the following example. A teacher requested help with a student who was causing a great deal of trouble on the playground. The consultant felt the best way to handle the problems was through a class meeting. This teacher had never held a class meeting and asked for assistance, so the consultant used this opportunity to demonstrate.

Billy was asked to leave the classroom. The general rule is that you do not discuss a child who is not here, but in this case he knew that a positive atmosphere had not been created and did not want to take chances that Billy would be hurt by the comments.

The class meeting was started by asking who was the biggest troublemaker in the class. They all chorused, "Billy." They were then asked what kind of things Billy did to cause trouble. They mentioned fighting, stealing balls, swearing, calling names, and so on. These first questions allow the students to express what they have been thinking and feeling.

The next questions allowed the students an opportunity to think and feel in a positive direction. "Why do you think Billy does these things?"

The answers included such things as, "Because he is mean." "He is a bully." "Finally one student said, "Maybe it is because he doesn't have any friends." Another student chimed in that Billy was living out of home with newly met relatives.

When the students were asked to discuss what this might mean to Billy, they offered such ideas as how hard it must be to leave your family, move so much, and so forth. They were now expressing understanding *for* Billy, instead of hostility.

Everyone in the class raised his hand when asked, “How many of you would be willing to help Billy?” A list was made on the board of all their suggestions of what they could do to help. These included walking to and from school with Billy, playing with him during recess, and eating lunch with him. Specific volunteers were then listed after each suggestion.

Later, Billy was told the class had discussed the problems that he had been having on the playground. When he was asked if he had any idea how many of the students wanted to help him, he looked at the ground and replied, “Probably none of them.” When he was told that everyone of the students wanted to help him, he looked up with wide eyes and asked as though he couldn’t believe it, “Every one?”

When the whole class decided to help Billy by being his friend, he felt such a sense of belonging that his behavior improved dramatically.

Another skill is to be willing to **take ownership** for some problems you have been trying to lay on the students. A seventh-grade teacher shared her experience with toothpick chewing. It drove her crazy, because not only did she think it looked disgusting, but she found toothpicks lying allover the classroom and school grounds. It was a problem for her, but not for her students. She had lectured and implored the students many times to please stop chewing toothpicks. Nothing happened. Finally she put it on the agenda and admitted she could understand it was not a problem for them, but she would appreciate it if they would help her with a solution to her problem. Because they had only fifty minutes for class, they could not spend more than ten minutes a day for class meeting; so quite often they didn’t come up with a final solution for several days. On the third day of discussing toothpicks, one of the students asked the teacher if she had seen anyone chewing toothpicks lately. She realized and admitted that she hadn’t. This student observed that maybe the problem had been solved.

This is an excellent example of how many times just discussing a problem is enough to make everyone aware of it and to continue working toward solutions outside the class meeting setting.

Be as **non-judgmental** as possible. When students feel they can discuss anything without being judged, they will bring many things out in the open for discussion and learning. One teacher expressed concern that if you talked about some things, such as spitting in the bathroom, it might give other students ideas they hadn’t thought of before. As we talked, he realized that the students knew what was going on and that not talking about it openly would not make it go away.

Do not censor agenda items. Some adults want to censor items on the agenda that they consider “tattletale” items. What may seem like a tattletale item to you is a real concern to the student. Other adults want to eliminate items if a similar problem has been discussed before. Again, it may be similar to you, but unique to the student. The important thing to remember is that the process is even more important than the solutions. Even if the item seems the same to you, the students may solve it differently or more quickly or more quickly because of their past experience with the process.

Finally, it is important to be able to **find the positive intent** behind every behavior. This enables students to feel validated and loved, an essential prerequisite to changing behavior. During one class meeting, the students were discussing a problem of cheating. The girl whose problem it was explained that she had looked at the words before her spelling test because she wanted to pass the test. Mr. Meder asked, “How many think it is really great that people want to pass their tests?” Most of the class raised their hands. Another boy admitted that he had been caught cheating and had to take a test over again. Mr. Meder asked, “Did it help you out?” The boy said yes. These are two examples of finding the positive in what could be seen only as negative.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Question: Don’t students need immediate solutions to their problems? I don’t think my students could wait for their problems to come up on the agenda.

Answer: I worked with another teacher who felt the same way. She had been having class meetings right after lunch to handle all problems that occurred during lunch recess. I encouraged her to try having her students put their problems on an agenda and wait at least three days to solve them in a class meeting. She later reported that she was surprised at how much satisfaction the students demonstrated just from the simple act of writing their problem on the agenda. That was their immediate solution. Their body language indicated relief as they walked away from the agenda. She also reported that three days later the discussion of the problems was much more rational and helpful because tempers had cooled considerably.

Question: What if a consequence that has been decided on doesn’t work effectively?

Answer: The decision should stay in effect until someone puts it back on the agenda. In one class they were having the problem of students leaning back in their chairs. The class decided that anyone who leaned back would have to stand up behind their chair. This did not work effectively, because too many students enjoyed standing up behind their chairs and it was disruptive to the class meeting. The teacher put this problem back on the agenda. The students agreed that it was disruptive and decided that anyone who leaned back would have to leave the class meetings as a reminder, but that they could come back when they were ready to sit correctly.

Question: What if someone feels that a consequence is unfair?

Answer: They can put it on the agenda. One class decided that Julia should have to write fifty sentences that she would not cut in line. She wrote the sentences but then she put it on the agenda that she did not think it was a fair, related consequence. She pointed out that since she had to do it, others might have to, and they probably wouldn’t like it either. One student asked Julia if she thought it had helped her decide not to cut in line anymore. She admitted that it probably had, but the class still agreed that writing sentences was not as reasonable as some other consequence might be. This was an excellent example of the kind of communication thinking, and cooperation that can be realized in group meetings.

Question: What do you do if students suggest punishment instead of logical consequences?

Answer: Eventually, when students become familiar with the process, they will usually work it out as in the foregoing example. To help teach the process, you might try asking students to state how they think their suggestions will be helpful and if it meets all Three Rs of Logical Consequences by being related, respectful, and reasonable. This is especially effective if it is required for every suggestion rather than just those that seem “suspicious.” Some teachers feel this takes too much time. They write down each suggestion given, and then the students decide which suggestions fit all the criteria of helpfulness and logical consequences before they vote.

Question: What if students start to “gang up” on a particular student?

Answer: This does happen sometimes, even after the students have learned to be positive and helpful most of the time. During one class meeting demonstration being done by Frank Medder, they were discussing the problem of a new student who had used “bad “ language on the playground. They seemed to be ganging up on him in hurtful ways. Frank redirected them through effective questioning. He asked, “How many know what it feels like to be a new kid in school?” Several students commented on their experience with this. Then Frank asked how many of them had taken the time to be his friend and tell her about school rules. A few raised their hands. Frank turned to the new boy and asked him if students used bad language at his old school. He acknowledged that they did. Frank then asked how many would be willing to make friends with him and tell him about our rules. Many raised their hands. They then went back to the regular format, but the atmosphere was now very positive and helpful. The students decided there wouldn’t be any consequences this time, because he didn’t know about their rules.

In one eighth-grade class meeting it seemed obvious that the student being discussed felt he was being ganged up on. The teacher asked the students, “How many of you would feel you were being ganged up on if you were in Bill’s position right now?” Most of them raised their hands. I then asked “How many of you would be willing to imagine yourself in the other person’s position when making comments and suggestions?” They all agreed they would and admitted it was funny they hadn’t thought of that before.

The students in this classroom had already decided that everyone would put their head down and close their eyes while voting, so that no one could be influenced by the vote of others or be worried that someone would get mad at them for their vote.

Question: What if a problem involves a student from another classroom?

Answer: Many schools have class meetings at the same time so other students can be invited from one classroom to the next. Before inviting another student into your classroom, have the students discuss what it might feel like to be called into another room. Have them discuss what they can do to make sure the invited student feels the purpose is to help and not to hurt.

In some classrooms, students brainstorm on positive things about the invited student so that they can start with compliments. Stuart was invited into Mrs. Peterson’s classroom because some students complained that he had stomped on their sandcastle. They started by complimenting him for his achievements in sports and his leadership abilities. Mrs. Peterson then asked Stuart if he

knew why he destroyed their sandcastles. He explained that one time it was an accident and another time it was because the bell had rung anyway. Stuart was asked if he had any suggestions for solving the problem. Stuart suggested that he would like to be the sandcastle patrol to make sure no one destroyed sandcastles. The class agreed unanimously with his suggestion.

Starting with compliments reduces defensiveness and inspires cooperation. Some classes start all problem solving by complimenting both parties involved on the positive things other appreciate about them.

Question: How do you stop tattletales from being on the agenda?

Answer: You don't. These are so often the kind of problems that are real to students. If teachers censor agenda items, students will lose faith in the process. Also, when students use the class-meeting process, these problems lose their "tattletale" connotation because students are trying to solve them in helpful, rather than hurtful, ways.

Question: What do you do when a few students monopolize the agenda?

Answer: Put it on the agenda and let the students solve the problem. One teacher shared that she had this problem. Tommy was putting as many as ten items a day on the agenda. I told her to put it on the agenda, but she discovered that another student already had. The class decided that each person could put one thing on the agenda each day. This teacher admitted that if she had tried to solve the problem herself, she would have allowed three to five times a day, but she liked the student's solution much better.

Question: Can students put the teacher on the agenda if they have a complaint?

Answer: If teachers have captured the spirit of the class-meeting process, they will feel comfortable discussing their own mistakes as an opportunity to learn. This is excellent modeling for the students.

One teacher allowed his students to hold a class meeting to discuss his behavior. An item on the agenda for discussion was that the teacher had taken a bag of potato chips from a student during recess because of the school rule against eating on the playground. On the way back to the teacher's room he ate some of the potato chips. The consequence decided on by the class was for the teacher to buy the student another bag of potato chips-but he could eat half of them first, because the bag was only half full when he got it.

Another time, a student put the teacher on the agenda for making a student run around the track for misbehaving during physical education. The students decided that this was punishment rather than a logical consequence. They decided that the teacher should run the track four times. The teacher accepted their decision, but after running the track, he put it on the agenda and discussed that it was unfair for him to be required to run four times when the student had only had to run once. He used this as an opportunity to discuss how easy it is to get into revenge when punishment is involved.

Question: What do you do when students won't admit they did whatever they have been accused of?

Answer: Once an atmosphere of trust and helpfulness has been established, it is rare that students don't feel free to take responsibility for their actions. Before this atmosphere has been established,

you might ask if anyone else in the class saw what happened. Some teachers have the student's role-play what happened. The role-playing usually gets so humorous that everyone is laughing. This sometimes inspires the reluctant student to tell how it *really* happened.

You could take this opportunity to ask some questions about why students might feel reluctant to admit they did something, such as, "How many of you would want to admit you had done something if you thought other people might want to hurt you, instead of help you?" "How many of you have had other people accuse you of doing something when you did not think you had done anything?" Many teachers have found it effective to ask the students if they would be willing to take the person's word that they didn't do it this time and put it on the agenda if it happens again.

Question: What do you do if students use the agenda as revenge? My students go to the agenda and if their name is on it, they put the person on the agenda who put them on.

Answer: This happens quite often before students learn and believe that the purpose of the agenda is to help each other, rather than to "get" each other. Many teachers solve this problem by using a shoebox for the agenda. They have students write their problem on different colored paper for different days of the week, so that they can tell which problems are the oldest. Some teachers also have students put written compliments in the box. These written compliments are read before the oral compliments are given. Most teachers who use the shoebox at first start using the open agenda as soon as they feel their students are ready for it.

Question: What should I do about students gathering at the agenda on their way into the classroom after recess?

Answer: If students are gathering at the agenda when coming into the classroom, making it difficult to start lessons, have a rule that the agenda call be used only when leaving the classroom. Sometimes just waiting until the next recess is enough of a cooling-off period for the student to decide that something wasn't serious enough to put on the agenda. Some teachers start out with this rule and then later, when the students can handle this without being disruptive, they allow them to use the agenda anytime.

Question: Is it really necessary to have class meetings every day? I'm not having that many problems and hate to take so much time?

Answer: The main reason for having class meetings every day is to teach a process. Many students do not really learn the process if there is a time span of a week between meetings. Several teachers have learned that having them every day can make the difference between success and failure. One teacher with a particularly difficult class was about to give up on class meetings until he started having them every day. He found that his students learned and trusted the process when it was done every day. The atmosphere of his class changed because the students learned positive skills, which they continued to use throughout the day.

Another teacher said she hadn't been having class meetings because she had a very cooperative class and that she wasn't having problems. She tried to have a class meeting when a big problem came up and found that the class could not handle it because they had not learned the process. This teacher had not understood the importance of class meetings as a process to teach students skills that enable them to solve problems when they occur.

Another teacher discovered that the reason his students weren't putting items on the agenda was that it took too long for items to come up when they had class meetings only once a week.

It is better to have class meetings every day if there are not any problems on the agenda, use the time after compliments for planning or discussing other issues.

Question: What if an item on the agenda involves a student who is absent?

Answer: If the absent student is the one who put the item on the agenda, cross it out and go on to the next item. If the absent student is the accused, skip it, but leave it on the agenda as the first item to be discussed when the student returns. This reduces the possibility that absences are because of the agenda. However, if you suspect that students want to be absent because their name is on the agenda, this should be discussed in a class meeting so that the class can decide what they need to do to make sure people know they want to help each other, rather than hurt each other.

Question: What if parents object?

Answer: Invite them to come and observe. Very few parents object after they have seen the class meeting in action. Some students may feel they can get special attention from their parents by complaining about being "picked on" in class meetings. Even when students try to describe class meetings accurately, it can sound like a kangaroo court to parents. Express to parents that you can understand their concern and would probably feel the same way if you hadn't had a thorough explanation. Some parents may come. Others will be reassured by your understanding and invitation.

If parents still object after visiting, or if they refuse to visit but still insist that their student cannot participate, arrange for their student to visit another classroom or the library during class meetings.

Question: What if students don't want to participate?

Answer: Students should not have a choice in this matter, just as they do not have a choice regarding their participation in math.

Question: How does this process work with kindergarten and first-grade students?

Answer: Great! Often these children will surprise their teacher with their skill in using the same vocabulary and the same problem-solving skills.

Younger students may need more help with the agenda, however. Some primary teachers have the students come to them or an aide and dictate what they would like to put on the agenda. Others have the students write their name and draw a picture to remind them of their problem. In these early grades, half the problems are often solved because the student can't remember what happened by the time their name comes up on the agenda.

Younger students may need a little more direction and guidance, so the teacher may need to be more actively involved than for older students. At the beginning of each meeting, Mrs. Binns has her first-grade students recite the purposes:

1. To help each other
2. To solve problems

They then recite the three rules:

1. Don't bring any objects to the circle
2. Only one person can speak at a time
3. All six legs must be on the floor (two human and four chair).

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

Secret Pals

Some teachers like to use the Monday class meeting for each student to draw the name of a secret pal for the week. The Friday class meeting is then used for each student to guess who his or her secret pal was by sharing what nice things that secret pal did for him or her.

Some preliminary teaching is important for this to be effective. First, have the students brainstorm on things they could do for a secret pal, such as leaving nice notes for him, sharing something with him, helping her, playing with him, smiling and saying hello every day, or leaving a piece of candy in her desk. After several ideas have been listed on the board, have each student write down at least five that they would like to do. They can tape this list on to their desk and cross off an item after they have done it. This reduces the possibility that some students will be overlooked. This has significantly increased positive feelings of friendship in many classrooms.

Chairperson

Many teachers rotate chairperson and secretarial duties. One student will be the chairperson *for* a week and will follow the format. The secretary is the person responsible for writing down all suggestions and final decisions.

Planning

There are certain decisions students cannot be involved in, such as curriculum (unless you want to encourage them to talk to the adults who make those decisions). However, there are many areas where students could participate in planning decisions. When students are invited to participate and help make the decisions, they are more highly motivated to cooperate in the fulfillment of those decisions.

Most classrooms have rules posted somewhere in the room. In one teacher's room the rules had the heading "We Decided." The rules were almost identical to those she had posted herself, but she noticed that cooperation and mutual respect improved when the students were involved in the discussion.

Many teachers have found that field trips are more successful if they are discussed first in a class meeting. Have the students discuss all the things that could go wrong on the field trip to make it a

bad experience and decide on solutions to these potential problems. They can then discuss what they need to do to make it a pleasant field trip.

Class meetings have also been helpful in making the substitute's job easier. Have a discussion about substitutes. Ask the students what they could do to "bug a sub." After they discuss this, ask them how a substitute might feel when being "bugged." It is amazing how many students never consider the substitute's feelings. Ask for ideas on how to make things pleasant for the substitute. Then ask how many are willing to help instead of hurt. When class meetings are a regular part of classroom procedure, student misbehavior is reduced when there is a substitute because self-discipline and cooperation increases. When students forget, misbehavior is reported on the agenda.

How to End Class Meetings

When class meetings are effective, students often get so involved that they would like to continue beyond a reasonable time. This problem is eliminated if meetings are held just before lunch or recess. It is rare that students want to continue into lunch or recess time.

Enforcing Consequences

It is not necessary for the teacher to enforce the consequences decided upon by the group. The students will be very aware of what happens, and if another student should "forget," he or she will be reminded, or it will go back on the agenda.

Things Often Get Worse Before they Get Better

Remember this point so that you won't become discouraged. Students quite often don't trust that adults are really willing to listen to them and take them seriously. It may take some time for them to get used to this. At first they may try to use this new power to be hurtful and punishing, because this is the model they have been used to.

Keep your long-range goals in mind and maintain the courage to be imperfect. Many teachers have been tempted to quit before they make it through the rough part. Some probably do. Those who "hang in there" express their delight with all the benefits for themselves and their students as time goes on.