

How to undo your classroom management mistakes

by Angela Watson

I remember volunteering at my church's Sunday School program many years ago and filling in as the assistant to one of the second grade Sunday School teachers. There were 29 kids in a very tiny, windowless classroom, and we were about to serve them animal crackers and juice. I had prepared 29 little portions plus one extra for the kid who inevitably would spill theirs, and had everything lined up on a tray.

I looked at the teacher and was just about to ask whether she wanted to select a few kids to come pass things out or if she wanted to call the kids over by tables, when she picked up the tray and yelled loudly, "Okaaaaay, kids, come and get your animal crackerrrrsssss!!"

My jaw dropped as 29 children shouted "Yayyyyyy!!" and raced over to be the first one to grab their juice and snack. There was climbing on chairs, yelling, pushing, a few hurt feelings, two kids in tears, and of course, lots of spilled juice.

It was one of the most chaotic moments I had ever witnessed in a classroom.

When the kids had left and the teacher and I were cleaning up and discussing how the morning went, I said casually, “That was kinda crazy at snack time, right?” She looked at me blankly. I said, “You know, with all the kids rushing over to you to try to get their cookies and juice first.”

She paused for a moment, and then said, “You know, I didn’t really think about it. I guess it IS a little crazy. But that’s the way the teacher before me did it. I don’t want to confuse the kids by doing something different now when this is what they’re used to.”

I still remember that exchange all these years later because it made such a huge impression on me, this idea that a teacher would continue to do something stressful, impractical, and fairly dangerous for the kids *simply because she didn’t want to change things up when she’d already trained them to do it another way.*

I think we ALL have examples of that from our own classrooms — procedures and routines we’ve taught that we *know* are wildly inefficient, but we just don’t have the time and energy to figure out a better way and retrain the kids.

I’ll tell you my personal philosophy on this. It’s NEVER too late to change something that’s not working. Not in your classroom, and not in your life.

You don’t have to wait for next year and an entirely new group of kids. You can — and should — modify your procedures, expectations, and teaching strategies ANY time they are not effective, at ANY time during the school year.

Don’t worry that changing things up will cause them to question your authority and expertise — that if you admit to students that you told them to do something and it didn’t work out very well, you are somehow incompetent as a teacher. I can’t even begin to count how many “brilliant” ideas I had that totally flopped in the classroom.

No one can accurately predict what’s going to work perfectly with every single group of students. Trial and error is part of the process of becoming a master teacher.

So don't stress about losing credibility by admitting something doesn't work, and definitely don't worry that making changes to the way you run your classroom will confuse the kids. Children are highly adaptable and can adjust to new routines very quickly. Usually, within just a day or two, almost everyone will have internalized the new routine.

The key to heading off both these potential issues (losing face, and confusing students) is to articulate what's not working and how you plan to fix it. Tell the class your observations about the problem and share your solution.

First, do some brainstorming about what you'd like to change and how you'd like things to run. Then have a conversation with your class about it. Don't try to sneak in a new procedure and act like that's the way you wanted things done all along. (Yeah, I've tried that. They weren't fooled.) Just level with the kids.

There are two approaches you can take to the conversation. The first involves a 5-10 minute discussion with the class, the second takes less than two minutes. I use the more in-depth method for big stuff, like changes to the homework routine, or centers and small group rotations. If it's something that has a big impact on students and that you've spent a lot of time training them to do and getting their buy-in, then it's worth taking the time to involve them in creating new expectations. For big or important changes, you could tell them:

I've been thinking about how we manage ___ in our class. I've noticed a problem with ____. Have any of you noticed this happening? Why do you think this might be a problem? I've been trying to think of good solutions. What are your ideas for fixing this problem? That gives me an idea ... you've touched on something I was considering over the weekend. What if we tried ___? It would work like this: ____. Would you be willing to try that out for a week or so? Let's practice it, and then we'll have another conversation soon to talk about how it's working. We can always make changes then. Thanks for working together to come up with solutions. I know that our class is going to run more smoothly now that we've had this conversation and decided to try something new.

For minor classroom procedures — getting drinks from the water fountain, passing in papers, pencil sharpening, etc. — I don't spend that much time because the kids don't care as much. I'll just say:

I noticed that our procedure for ___ isn't working very well these days. Sometimes I see ___ happening and ___ not happening, and that causes a problem with ___. So I'd like to try this instead: ___. Does that make sense to you? Let's practice right now. Team One, can you model how to follow this new procedure for us? Alright, let's watch Team One as they try this out.

Undoing your classroom management mistakes is really as simple as acknowledging that things aren't working and talking to students about it. You can brainstorm better procedures together, or you can have solutions in mind and sort of guide the kids to come to the understanding on their own.

Frame the whole conversation as something you're trying out together and can revise at any time. **This teaches kids how to problem solve and how to continually monitor whether strategies are working and be able to adapt them as needed. It also takes the pressure off of YOU to solve every problem in the classroom.**

Let's face it, with some of the dilemmas we're facing — like getting students to stop talking when you're giving directions — there aren't any easy and clear solutions for. **Just raising the concern with students will often go a long way in creating change because it makes them aware of the problem.** This puts them on your side so you're working together to make the classroom run more smoothly.

To be really honest, I've found that my attitude has the biggest effect on how smoothly our routines and procedures go. You know how sometimes you ask the class to do something, but mentally, you're thinking: *They're totally not going to follow directions — I just know it. In five seconds this kid is going to be pushing and yelling and five people are going to forget to turn anything in, and I'm just going to be repeating myself all over, again.*

I know that tendency well. And when I'm mentally creating a list of all the things the kids have done wrong, predicting how many ways they'll screw up next, and bemoaning how poorly they listen and follow directions, I tend to get discouraged and take it out on the class.

But when I choose to be patient and take the time to involve kids in creating and practicing expectations, I reconnect with the feeling that we are a team.

Remember: Your thoughts create your feelings, your feelings affect your behaviors ... and your behaviors determine whether students feel stressed out or capable of doing their best.

So, that's my advice to you: recognize what's not working and choose to create change. Be supportive of the kids as they adjust and keep an optimistic attitude about the outcome. Each year you teach, it will get easier to find what works and what doesn't. Don't be afraid to experiment! Take the kids along on the journey with you, and learn together.

About the author

Angela is a National Board Certified Teacher with 8 years experience as a K-12 instructional coach and 11 years experience in the classroom. As founder of Due Season Press and Educational Services, she has created [printable curriculum resources](#), [online courses](#), [4 books](#), the [Truth for Teachers podcast](#), and the [40 Hour Teacher Workweek Club](#). She's been supporting teachers through this website since 2003.

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