

The Classroom Behavior Manual

How to Build
Relationships with Students,
Share Control, and
Teach Positive Behaviors

Scott Ervin





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A Dramatic Proposition

Fifteen minutes into my first day of teaching, blood splattered across my face.

The day had started peacefully enough. I arrived to substitute in a 5th grade classroom. School started at 7 a.m., and my students for the day appeared to be sleeping. I began teaching, even though no one was listening. Things were going better than I had anticipated.

Then it happened.

While standing, chalk in hand, next to what we called a “blackboard,” I heard a commotion somewhere outside the room. I turned quizzically toward my newly acquired students, and one boy in the front row rolled his eyes, exasperated with my slow comprehension, and explained the situation: “It’s a fight.”

I sprang into action, sprinting full speed out of the classroom and leaving 25 5th graders to educate themselves. Following the noise, I ran into a small, smelly room. I, a male substitute teacher on his first day, had just run into the girls’ bathroom. So far, so good.

I immediately came upon two 6th graders. One girl was fully on her back, her legs furiously attempting to pedal-kick a long-limbed girl who had maneuvered around the kicking action and was enthusiastically beating the snot out of the first girl’s face. Blood was flying everywhere, and as I grabbed Punching Girl’s shoulders to pull her off Kicking Girl, an inexplicably large amount of blood flew from the fist of Punching Girl, landing on my face and neck.

Once I had separated Punching Girl from Kicking Girl, a female staff member walked into the room and yelled, “What the hell are you doing?!” Looking back, I think she might have been talking to me.

As I remember it, the staff member walked with the girls to the office and I went back to the classroom. I wiped the blood off myself with a dry paper towel and attempted to teach. I was never asked about the incident.

As it turned out, my adventure in the bathroom went only slightly better than the rest of the day. Strangely, my heroics in the girls’ restroom did little to impress my newfound class. Mostly asleep before the fight, once I returned from my adventure, they had all woken up. A majority of the students refused to sit in their desks, or work, or be quiet, or be pleasant to each other, or not swear at me. Breaking up another fight in the classroom immediately before dismissal bookended the day nicely.

When I received the 4:30 a.m. robocall for a kindergarten substitute position the next morning, I gladly accepted. Fifth and 6th grade bathroom fight club officiating would have to wait, at least for a day. Kindergarten: how hard could it possibly be? Kindergartners were what, 5 years old?

My second day was going to be so much better than my first.

Like the previous posting, the school for day number two was in a rough part of town. Dilapidated homes and boarded-up storefronts surrounded a sturdy but aging school building. I checked in with an unenthused school secretary.

While the neighborhood and school office staff were less than welcoming, the kindergarten room, my home for the day, was like a scene from a Candy Land board game. It was fantastically colorful and well decorated. The space was perfectly clean and nicely organized. Exhaustive, detailed lesson plans were laid out neatly. They expressly described each moment of the day: how to turn in work, where to sit, how to line up for lunch. The day’s materials were arranged at right angles on the teacher’s desk and reading tables. Most important, there were clearly stated rules on the board next to a color-coded, card-based behavior chart, with each student’s name printed neatly on a transparent plastic pocket holding three cards.

I had hit the substitute teacher jackpot. This was going to be a piece of cake! They had tested me the previous day, but the Gods of Education were smiling down upon me now. With every possible angle and loose end already taken care of by what appeared to be the best teacher in the history of the world, I casually perused the day’s lesson plans before confidently leaning back in my chair and waiting for the day to begin.

Things began as I had hoped they would. Three rather timid small souls wandered through the door, wondering who I was and what I was doing there. This was a welcome, healthy reaction to seeing a substitute teacher in the classroom.

It was also the last normal event of the day.

A guttural yell worthy of a battlefield charge rang out as a child with an angry, furrowed brow barreled into Candyland. The complete lack of a reaction from the other students to this feral lunatic should have tipped me off as to what I was dealing with, but I immediately walked into the hallway and asked a teacher, whom I had not yet met, what had happened in the hallway to have triggered this student into exhibiting such rage. The teacher, looking confused, peered into my room and said, “Oh, that’s just Robert.”

I stared at the teacher, stunned.

“He’s always like that.”

It felt like the wind had been kicked out of my chest. And it was about to get worse.

“Just wait until you meet David.”

You’ve got to be kidding me.

I didn’t meet David right away. We started without him, which was a great relief, since Robert was walking around the room punching people, grabbing things out of their hands and throwing them. At one point, he and another student squared off, prizefighter style, in the corner of the room. I separated them. Keep in mind, I had not yet had time to introduce myself to anyone. I was too busy running around stopping kids from injuring each other or destroying the room. Robert’s entry into the room seemed to have caused a switch to be flipped in the minds of the previously inert students. I had heard horror stories about teachers having to run around “putting out fires.” I wasn’t putting out fires. I was in the middle of a fire . . . and burning.

One boy kept yelling that he was about to “lose his mind up in here.” One girl was crying hysterically for a reason that I could not begin to understand. It is possible that she had been punched in the face. There is a very good chance that I would not have noticed. There was too much going on to be able to know what happened. One boy acted as Robert’s sidekick, walking next to him as he whispered excitedly in his ear. Robert was still yelling at the top of his lungs and still throwing things and punches. The well-crafted lesson plans lay neglected as I ran around the room and dove across desks to prevent child-on-child violence and property destruction. The secretary came over the loudspeaker to ask for the attendance that I had “forgotten” to send. I remember thinking, “If I turn to find the attendance paper, one of these kids is going to be killed.”

Then David walked in.

Fantastic.

I will never forget how he walked into the room with a bizarre smile on his face, looked at me, then, like a moth to flame, still smiling broadly, went immediately to the only person doing her morning work in the room, took her paper, crumpled it up, and threw it in the garbage.

I began using both of my behavior management skills: screaming and yelling. Neither had any effect. David and Robert wandered around the room. Robert hurt people, and David took their stuff. Kids continued to cry, threaten, bait each other, and run out of the room. I tried pulling kids' cards. No one cared, except for one boy who, when I pulled his final card, quickly evacuated the classroom. Thank goodness, David was kind enough to go looking for him, even though I asked him to please, please God, not do that.

I called the principal to remove students four separate times that day. I could have called 30 times. By the third removal, she was not pleased. Each student would come back a half-hour after they left, and immediately go back to doing whatever it was that got them sent to the office in the first place.

I didn't get to more than 30 minutes of the beautifully crafted lesson plans that had been left by the teacher—a teacher for whom I now had a lot of questions. I believe that 15 of those minutes of instruction occurred during the brief period of time when both Robert and David were in the principal's office.

After seven of the worst hours of my life, the children were gone. I cannot fully express the amount of helplessness that one feels after attempting a job they always wanted to do and failing completely. The profound defeat was overwhelming—and was somehow made worse by the fact that the people who just defeated me were 3 feet tall.

I slowly shuffled out of the classroom and down the hallway. Tired, dehydrated, and done, I turned the corner into the office as the school secretary spoke. "Here's your sub now," she said to a woman with her back to me.

The leader of the class that had just ripped through my soul turned around. My first thought was that she looked like I felt. She was a young, tired-looking woman. I guessed that she was around my age. Her eyes looked sad and anxious as she clutched a water bottle while saying words that I didn't expect: "I'm so sorry."

She wasn't trying to be funny or flippant. She was expressing sincere empathy for what she knew I had just endured.

"What in the world just happened to me?" I exhaled. I put my hands on the counter between myself and the school secretary and slowly collapsed on top of the

linoleum, extending my outreached arms across the counter. If I had not still been in shock, I think I might have started crying. “They were completely out of control. How in the world do you control those kids?” I asked.

She laughed a slow, sad laugh. “Who said I can control those kids? Your guess is as good as mine. I took today off for a mental health day. I’m just here for an Intervention Assistance Team meeting.”

“How do you stay sane? Is it really like that every day?”

“I wasn’t in there with you, but I am guessing it is pretty much the same. I’m sorry you had to deal with them today. I just needed a break. And I don’t stay sane. This is my last year teaching. I’m quitting. I’m done. It’s my second year. I have no idea how I’m going to make it to the end of the year. I taught 5th grade last year and it was horrible. I thought kindergarten would be easier, but it’s not.”

I was stunned.

“But your room, it’s so perfect . . . you’ve got the rules up . . . and the cards . . . doesn’t that stuff help?”

“It worked great for the first morning on the first day, and then all hell broke loose in the afternoon. I’ve been in hell ever since.”

“What happened? What happened at the end of the morning that made them act like that?”

I got the idea that this question would have offended her if she had any kind of respect for me or my opinion. She let out what could be described as a cross between a sigh and an exasperated chuckle.

“You mean, what did I do to mess them up in my first three hours with them? Look, what you saw today—they came in like that. A lot happens to these kids before they show up on the first day of kindergarten.”

I felt bad for asking the question, but I pressed on. I needed help. I wanted answers. “Can you tell me anything that actually works in getting these kids to do what they’re supposed to do?”

She picked up a box of files and started walking toward the door as she spoke. “Look, I really am sorry to put you through what you went through today, and I don’t want to be this negative. This isn’t the person I want to be, which is why I’m getting out. But I have to be honest with you: nothing works.”

“Nothing Works”

Those words haunted me, and with every day of the several months that I continued to work as a substitute teacher, they proved to be more and more correct. Every day,

I failed to get students to be cooperative, no matter how much or how loudly I yelled. Every day, I saw the teachers and principals around me failing in very much the same way. Even the most experienced educators were often no better off than I was. Even those who were doing all of the right things to elicit positive behaviors—clearly stating rules, using consequences, having good lesson plans, praising positive behaviors, and having routines set up for how to manage the room—even those teachers had rooms that were out of control. It seemed that nothing was working for anyone.

During my master’s program observations of different kinds of schools, suburban, rural, and private, I saw a similar dynamic. Students may not have been as difficult to control, but in every class, there always seemed to be at least one, but usually a few, “tougher” students for whom traditional discipline strategies were ineffective, and they often seemed to make the class’s general behavior worse. These few students appeared to be able to take over most classrooms, leaving their teachers at a loss as to what to do.

“Nothing works.” Even in the face of the mounting affirming evidence, I still wondered, how could this be true? After all, students had been around forever, teachers had been around forever, teachers who teach teachers to teach had been around forever, and the problem of having to get students to use positive, prosocial behaviors had been around forever. How could educators not know *exactly* how to get students to act in a way that made the classroom better, schools better, society better, and the students themselves better?

During the several months I spent in perhaps 20 different school buildings as a substitute teacher, and then the two years I taught in my own classrooms, I was determined to figure out what worked. To be clear, my open-minded curiosity had no impact on my own behavior management deficits. I continued to yell and attempt to intimidate my students, and every day I drove home defeated, exhausted, and distraught.

“These Kids . . .”

What made the situation more frustrating was that, almost every day, I was asking for advice for how to manage behaviors, just like I did on that second day of my teaching career. And when actual advice was given—something beyond “nothing works”—it was almost always the same, and it often started with the same two words:

“These kids . . .”

I was searching for how to manage the behaviors of all kids, but the answers I received to my questions were answers for how to manage a *certain* kind of student.

As I was in a district that served a very high percentage of students who were poor and members of minority groups, what was being communicated was clear, and the advice was almost always similar: *“These kids need to be dealt with sternly. . . . They don’t get a lot of love at home, so they won’t respond to it well at school. . . . Show them who is boss. . . . Get up in their faces. . . . Don’t give them an inch. . . . They won’t take you seriously unless you yell. . . . They only respect strength. . . . You have to be tough, or they’ll run all over you.”*

In my interviews for teaching jobs, two years in a row, I was told by two different principals to “never smile in front of students.” It was made clear to me that this was a condition of my employment.

Even then, I knew that these instructions on how to deal with “these kids” went directly against what we know about how human brains work. The human brain cannot effectively work, learn, and function when faced with fear and threats. The human brain cannot function until the organism in which it is vested has been able to establish a functional environment whereby the organism can have all safety, control, and love needs met.

Even then, I knew that this advice about “these kids” was classist and racist. I think we all did.

But we took the advice anyway. We took this advice for the same reason someone wandering for days in the desert will eventually drink the sand: there was no alternative. Behavior management advice given in college either didn’t exist or was wholly inadequate to the point of being insulting. Write good lesson plans and there won’t be any misbehavior? Really? Have consequences for misbehavior? Great. What do those look like? Praise students? Huh. Why do the most difficult students act worse when I praise them? Have routines for classroom tasks and clearly define rules? Great. What do I do when students refuse to follow rules and procedures? What then?

The terrible trick that is played on educators is that this ineffective behavior management advice is not only ineffective with all kids, it is particularly ineffective with “these kids.” It is so unsophisticated, and so dismissive of the effects of trauma, that it is least effective with the students who need it the most! Tragically, this often leads educators to feel hopeless about their ability to help “these kids.”

The ugly truth is that when this advice causes you to crash and burn over and over and over, most people, in their desperation to do the job that most of us have been dreaming of doing since we were kids—will take any advice offered, especially when everyone around us has that advice reinforced by principals and fellow teachers every day.

The truth is that we were all really good people doing very bad things to students. We had all voluntarily chosen to work in that district, where a very high percentage of our families dealt with high rates of generational poverty and our students experienced much higher than average rates of trauma. We wanted to help the students who needed us the most. Why were we yelling at them all day long? Why were we working ourselves to death in an attempt to scare and intimidate students into submission? Why? Because we did not know what else to do.

This horrifying way of working with students was able to exist in the vacuum caused by not having quality ways to manage behaviors available to us. Cumulatively, it turned the schools that I saw into machines that accidentally reinforced negative, antisocial behaviors. In this vacuum, these schools, through no fault of their own, systematically trained students to get what they wanted (attention, avoidance, or control) through negative behaviors. Of course, this is not the fault of the students, who depend on educators knowing how to manage behaviors. It is also not the fault of the educators, who depend on universities to teach them how to manage behaviors.

As I was working through my master's degree program, I knew and socialized with teachers who taught in every kind of school with every kind of student. We often discussed a similar trend: the "these kids" phenomenon also enveloped schools that only had a small number of "these kids." To be fair, students who grow up in generational poverty do tend to have more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These traumatic experiences give students a higher chance of having attention problems and a higher tendency toward behaviors that many consider "impulsive," among a tragically long list of other negative effects (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014). Many of these behaviors have been reinforced at home, often before the child's first day of kindergarten. What I noticed (and what I continue to notice now, years later, as a behavioral consultant) in these schools is that many teachers will subscribe to the "these kids" fallacy with students whom they know to have had multiple ACEs: "Johnny is just different, and I need to treat him differently. I need to intimidate Johnny into learning and listening to me."

The irony is that this reaction to a student being perceived as more difficult is the exact opposite of what Johnny needs, and will be especially ineffective with Johnny because he has experienced more trauma than the average student. Students who have had several ACEs, no matter how much money their parents make or what color they are, need to have measures taken to make them feel *more* safe and less threatened, not less safe and *more* threatened.

The use of intimidation and fear as a means of getting students to be cooperative works the least with "these kids," the ones who are in most need. This is yet another

terrible trick played on educators who, once again, may see their own failures as a sign that there is no hope for their most vulnerable students.

What I and other teachers accidentally took part in was a tragic one-two punch: many of these students had an acute sensitivity to these assaults due to their level of trauma, and we assaulted their brains with intimidation and fear. This misstep is a major contributor to the school-to-prison pipeline. Educators are not taught how to manage behaviors, so many accept the “these kids” fallacy out of pure desperation. They internalize the fallacy and attempt to scare and intimidate students into working hard and behaving. When such tactics predictably backfire, educators suspend the students. Tragically, this reinforces the negative behavior, because students who are intimidated and scared every day understandably enjoy getting a break from the intimidation and fear of school. Finally, to get more breaks from intimidation and fear, they use more and more negative behaviors, successfully getting suspended until they are expelled or they drop out. This is the essential motor that runs schools often called “dropout factories.”

There are surely other factors contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline, such as the conditions that cause traumas outside school in the first place, but this ubiquitous dynamic is a significant one. The data are clear:

- Half of all students who enter 9th grade with three or more suspensions on their record will drop out of high school (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2014).
- One out of 11 high school dropouts is currently in prison. For African Americans, the ratio is one out of four (Eley, 2009).
- One out of 131 people in this country is currently sitting in a prison cell (Public Safety Performance Projects, 2009).
- One out of 31 adults in this country is in jail or prison, on parole, or on probation (Public Safety Performance Projects, 2009).

Students with high ACE scores are failed by ineffective, incomplete, or nonexistent behavior management techniques. These techniques accidentally encourage negative behaviors, causing vulnerable students to repeat, explore, and heighten their behaviors, which leads to suspensions. Suspensions often lead to expulsions or dropping out. Dropping out often leads to prison.

I believe I knew all of this at the time. Still, I continued in my ways for lack of any other ideas. Hurting the students that I wanted to help was destroying me, not to mention destroying them. I knew something had to change.

Approaching a Breaking Point, and Then, a Breakthrough

After having my own classrooms for two successive years, teaching 5th and 1st grades, I knew I was reaching my physical and emotional limit for hurting kids no matter how badly I wanted to help them. As I prepared for another year, this time at a different school with the same set of challenges, I knew one of three things was going to happen. Either I was going to quit after a nervous breakdown, or I was going to get fired for having a nervous breakdown in class and hurting a student, or I was going to learn how to do my job. Since no one had helped me in the first two years of my teaching career, I was skeptical about my chances of avoiding possibilities numbers one or two.

The next year, I began teaching at a school that had just been founded. As a brand-new school, it had a highly advantageous student-to-teacher ratio and a school culture that was carefully and thoughtfully curated. Even though it served a neighborhood that actually had a slightly higher rate of generational poverty than the school in which I had served before, I was able to just barely find my footing as someone who could be successful in getting students to cooperate. Through careful trial and error, as well as some conceptual professional development, I started to notice and act upon new insights: students used slightly more positive behaviors when I was able to build relationships with them, were nicer to me when I was able to share control with them, and decreased the frequency of negative behaviors when I stopped them from getting what they wanted using such behaviors. I started to be able to handle students better than other teachers. Still, what I was doing was sloppy and only somewhat effective: I was having to think too much about “behavior management” while I was teaching. I started to dabble in creating procedures that did the relationship building and control sharing for me, *while I was teaching*, and I started to create strategies that I would later use habitually, without thinking, that would do the same. I felt like I had the necessary foothold now to be able to someday become the teacher I always hoped I could be—though I still had a long way to go.



Up until now, I have given you very few, if any, reasons for why you should be reading this book. After all, at this point, all you know about me is that I was very aware that no one had the ability to manage behaviors very well, that I wanted to

figure out how to do it, and that I asked a lot of questions about that while suffering through the worst two years of my life.

Here are a couple of other things to know about me that may also discourage you from continuing to read this book:

- *I am not patient, and I have a bad temper.* This may seem like a strange thing for an author to admit in a book that is supposed to teach teachers how to be nice to students.
- *I was not a “good teacher.”* My lesson plans were weak. I couldn’t write student learning objectives (SLOs) or reading improvement monitoring plans (RIMPs) to save my life, and I couldn’t map out curricula. I was disorganized, forgetful, and unable to effectively enter grades into the database on time, monitor progress, or be a good school employee in general.

But here is why you should keep reading: I look at life through a certain kind of lens. I respond to problems by thinking, “This is terrible; I have to make it better.” This comes from my innate hardwiring. I was born this way. It’s who I am, and it is very annoying to be around—or at least, that’s what my wife keeps telling me.

The benefit for you, the reader, is that every single day of my teaching career, I have thought, “This is terrible; I have to make it better” while looking at every aspect of my teaching. The reason I was so hopelessly bad at the aforementioned activities was because I knew that there was no way I could even *begin* to teach until I could get students to be cooperative and hard-working, let alone have the time and mental bandwidth to be able to do the mountains of work that educators have to do. I knew, almost instinctively, that I couldn’t come close to being able to do everything I needed to do to be a “good teacher” if I couldn’t create a positive classroom environment where my students could learn, I could teach, and students would consistently use positive behaviors.

With every day, no matter how successful I was, I thought, just like during the initial dark days, “This is terrible; I have to make it better.”

So I did. Every day, I would work at making something that would improve the situation: effective strategies and procedures for building relationships, sharing control, and holding students accountable. And every day, I reviewed what I had made and thought, “This is terrible; I have to make it better,” and so those strategies and procedures became more tested, durable, and effective every time I used them.

As a result, I became better than any teacher I had yet seen at building relationships, sharing control, and holding students accountable. I went from relying on prayer as a behavior management tool (“Please, God, don’t let Angela be in my class

next year”) to actually requesting that all of my grade’s most difficult students be put on my roster. I was asking for “these kids” be put in my class. Over the decade that I used these strategies and procedures, I did not have to appeal to an administrator for discipline one single time. Not one office referral. Not one suspension. Not one expulsion. The school-to-prison pipeline encountered a serious disruption when it attempted to run through Mr. Ervin’s classroom.

As my procedures and strategies became more and more effective, and I became more and more fluent in my use of them, I noticed something amazing: not only did my students use positive behaviors at an incredibly high level, but they were also learning! Both my behavioral and academic outcomes were excellent! Even though I was and remain naturally bad at all of the elements of teaching, like writing lesson plans and learning goals, I was able to pay more attention to them because I was no longer drowning in a sea of negative behaviors!

I now have the honor of traveling the country teaching educators these strategies and procedures. I get to hear how the use of these procedures and strategies has saved educators’ careers. I get to coach teachers in their classrooms and show them how, the more effectively they use their strategies and procedures, the fewer negative behaviors they have. I get to save educators from having to endure experiences like my first two years of teaching, asking but never getting the necessary means to do my job.

I get to tell them what I learned: that behavior *management* is impossible. It implies that you can *manage* behaviors that are out of control (you can’t). What is possible is *behavioral leadership*: the ability, through systematic use of strategy and procedural instruction, to *change* negative behaviors while simultaneously managing all behaviors. A leader creates function and oversees the management of it.

A leader must be able to model the behaviors they want to see in the people around them. Without behavioral leadership, it is difficult or impossible to act like the person you want your students to emulate, because you will have to deal with so many negative behaviors that you will not be calm enough to model the positive behaviors you want your students to use. Behavioral leadership allows educators to be the leaders that their students need them to be.

This is why behavioral leadership is a foundational necessity for successful classrooms and instruction. Without behavioral leadership, you can’t come close to doing everything you need to do and being the person you need to be in order to be the most effective educator you can be for your students.

Without behavioral leadership, students won’t be able to efficiently and sufficiently learn positive behaviors and responsibility. Without behavioral leadership,

the school-to-prison pipeline will continue unabated. Without behavioral leadership, students will be spending their days in classrooms that are not as healthy, safe, engaged, supporting, and challenging as they could be. Without behavioral leadership, equal access to education will continue to be impossible. We will continue to use unsophisticated and hurtful behavior management strategies that trigger students with high ACE scores into using negative behaviors that will disrupt learning and lead to suspensions and expulsions. Entrance into the school-to-prison pipeline will continue to be the result.

It is not enough to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline; it must be destroyed. It is not enough that some students have access to behavioral leadership educators. All students in all schools deserve access to classrooms where the educators know exactly how to build relationships, share control, and hold students accountable for their actions and inactions without anger or haste. Educators who are trained in behavioral leadership can create classrooms where students feel safe and loved, and experience the healthy control they need to be able to function and learn. In these classrooms, students can learn the behaviors and habits necessary to be successful and happy in life.

We can't control or know everything about what happens in the lives of our students when they are not at school. We don't even know what will happen to them after they leave us in the afternoon and before we see them again the next morning. Therefore, we should treat all of our students as if, during that time, they were abused or neglected. Why? Because some of them were. We should treat all students, every day, with the care and love necessary to make sure their school days are as calm, engaging, and educational as they possibly can be.

Did you figure out the trick of behavioral leadership? While behavior management fails all kids—and fails “these kids” more than anyone—behavioral leadership is not only effective with “these kids”; it is effective with all kids! All kids benefit from a calm, kind teacher who builds relationships, shares control, and teaches positive behaviors.

All students—no matter who they are, what has happened to them in their lives, or what they experienced that morning—if treated this way, every day, will feel safe enough, cared for enough, and loved enough to be ready to learn and thrive while they are in your classroom.

All students belong. All students can succeed. The book you are holding is the manual for how to do this.

Let's get started.

2

Before You Begin

Understand the why and the how of this manual.

Several months after I started substitute teaching, I achieved the unthinkable: for the first time, the 5th grade class that I had been teaching for weeks was quiet. I had done it. I had their attention. They looked at me, their eyes wide, their attention rapt, their bodies still, their voices silent.

For 10 seconds.

Then, one snicker chorused and escalated into a classroom filled with belly laughs. Across the room, the desk I had just thrown lay in silent testament to my behavior management skills.

Oops.

Everyone has a breaking point. That day, I hit mine.

I can describe all the events and conditions that led up to my abrupt outburst, but really, I had just one reason for picking up that desk, flinging it into a wall, and proceeding to yell incoherently at an 11-year-old boy: I had no idea what I was doing.

Nothing had changed since the first day that I had arrived to substitute. Nothing worked. I was educated. I was hardheaded. I was committed. I was where I wanted to be.

But nothing worked.

I was broken in. I knew the kids. I knew the school and the community. I recognized the challenging conditions that trailed them into my classroom.

But nothing worked.

I listened. I cared. I tried. I kept showing up.

But nothing worked!

No class I had taken, no degree I had earned, no book I had read had trained me to elicit positive behaviors from students who had been trained to exhibit negative behaviors long before they walked through my door.

I spent the rest of that year and the next year doing the same things I had been doing—minus throwing desks. I tried everything I had been taught: I kept behavior charts, called kids' homes, sent students to the principal's office, issued warnings, posted rules, established routines, praised good behavior, and imposed punishments for bad behavior. I experimented with other methods: I threatened and cajoled, yelled and lectured, begged and bribed, took away lunch time and recess, and kept kids after school.

It was exhausting, debilitating, and entirely ineffective. I was not teaching. Instead, I was simply reinforcing every negative behavior the students had already learned. Something had to change—and that “something” needed to be me.

That's why I wrote this manual.

Why

Fast-forward about 15 years.

It was my favorite time of day. I had just finished my read-aloud—Michael Buckley's *The Unusual Suspects*, from his *Sisters Grimm* series. My students, the toughest in the building, had seamlessly begun their Silent Work procedure. The students had transitioned using the Lock-It-In procedure, one team at a time: first the Butterfly Marines, then the Vikings, the Fireballs, the Sharks, and finally, the Tigers. The students immediately went to work completing their leveled reading group assignment from the previous day.

While they worked—yes, *worked*—I took a few minutes for myself. I sank into my desk chair, rested my chin in my hand, and stared out my open window. It was one of those rare days in May when my classroom was comfortable despite the school's lack of air conditioning. I looked at my students. Some were still working on their assignments, while others had moved on to books of interest that they read silently while sitting at their desks or lying on the carpet.

I thought back to those first years of teaching. I remembered the anger, frustration, and helplessness I had felt. I remembered the lectures, warnings, and threats I

had used. I thought about how such tactics had nearly destroyed me. Then, I observed the peaceful, calm environment that I now got to enjoy every day.

The kids hadn't changed. The students with whom I was working were probably even more difficult than the student whose desk I had thrown, so many years before. But I had changed.

I knew what I was doing.

Now, instead of counting down the minutes until the end of the school day like I did during my early years in the classroom, I spent time with my students outside school. I took them to basketball games. I had them dropped off at my house at 5 o'clock in the morning when their parents couldn't arrange other transportation. Each year, I took my class on a field trip to Ohio University, located two hours away.

Now, instead of counting down the days until the end of the year, I cried every June at the thought that I wouldn't be seeing my students again until August—and often, never again. On the last day of school each year, my students huddled in the middle of our classroom with their arms around one another's shoulders. In the middle of the circle, I knelt on the floor and tearfully expressed what I felt about their potential, how much I loved them, and how I would always remember them. Big, tough kids cried with me.

That day, relaxing in my desk chair, I thought about how grateful I was to have saved my career—to have saved my soul—by learning how to work with kids, no matter how difficult they were.

It sounds like a Hollywood movie, but it isn't. In movies, teachers have near-magical powers whereby caring is enough. Just by caring about kids, they transform their lives. The caring spills forth in a montage of well-written lines and heart-wrenching scenes—none of which address a single effective way to train students to exhibit positive behavior. The fairy godteacher somehow just reaches them—by caring, by listening, by connecting, by understanding, by standing up for them, by bending the rules, by shaking some sense into them, by confronting their dangerous realities, by using so-called “tough love,” by POOF! Hollywood magic.

In real life, it doesn't matter how much you care for kids if you don't know how to get them to use positive behaviors. It just doesn't. It's not that the tens of thousands of teachers who quit every year don't care about kids. It's not that they don't want to be there and do better. They just don't know what they're doing. They can't train students to be people whom they want to be around because they haven't been trained themselves.

But I had learned how to train students.

It was a bittersweet feeling to watch my students that day. That June would be my last June huddling in a circle in the classroom. I had resigned my position as a teacher at Fairborn Primary School. The demands of politicians and bureaucrats who couldn't do my job in a million years had worn me down in a way that even the toughest of my students in those early years had not.

Besides, I had a book to write.

I had learned how to elicit positive behavior from even the most challenging students, and I could—I would—teach those procedures and strategies to other teachers.

Here is the exciting part: if I can do this, *anyone* can do it. I am not an organized person. My lesson plans were weak. I have a temper and I am easily frazzled. But I got my real-life Hollywood ending with my kids. If I can attain this fantastic level of success, you can, too.

That's *why* you need to read this manual.

How

Over the past 20-plus years, I have been a teacher, principal, discipline specialist, superintendent, and behavioral consultant. I have never been a teacher or administrator at a school where the poverty rate was lower than 60 percent. I spent the first decade of my career in the city of Dayton, Ohio, in schools with at least a 90 percent poverty rate. For the last 10 years of my teaching career, I requested to have the most difficult students in my room. The poverty rate of the students in my classroom during that time was never lower than 90 percent. For the last six years of my teaching career, I worked in one of the largest primary schools in the United States, with nearly 450 students in each grade. During that time, I continued to request the most difficult students. One of the years I taught 3rd grade, I had a 95 percent poverty rate in my room, and yet, 95 percent of my students passed the Ohio Third Grade Reading Guarantee. Those numbers are nearly unheard of, especially for a teacher like me who isn't good at writing lesson plans, isn't tremendously organized, and can't do curriculum mapping or write a student learning objective to save his life.

How did I do it? I used specific and explicit procedures and strategies to elicit positive behaviors from students in a calm, assertive way. These prosocial behaviors included (but were not limited to) hard work, treating others with kindness, being courteous, and using an appropriate voice level. After creating these procedures and strategies, 99 percent of students' time in my classroom was spent on task. Students loved being in my classroom, and I loved being with my students, no matter what kind of behaviors they came in exhibiting on the first day. For the last six years of my

teaching career, I had students whose combined office referrals for behavioral infractions the previous year numbered in the hundreds. Yet not one time in the last decade of my teaching career did I use an administrator for a disciplinary situation—not one referral, suspension, or expulsion.

This manual details how I accomplished these goals. The following chapters explicitly and systematically teach how to use specific procedures and strategies to create a functional, prosocial classroom environment. The aim of this book is to help schools produce healthy, successful people who work hard, treat others well, and make the world a better place.

A copious amount of research shows that to create a functional, prosocial classroom, students need quality interactions with calm yet assertive teachers who build relationships, develop empathy, share control in healthy ways, hold students accountable through appropriate consequences, and have consistent classroom procedures. Researchers have written extensively on this subject. They are experts at understanding *why*: *why* do students need empathy? *Why* are relationships important? *Why* do students need a healthy amount of control? But this is not just another *why* book.

This book is a manual. It is a *how* book. It contains procedures and strategies that enable teachers to gain control of their classrooms. A strategy is a plan of action designed to achieve a major or overall aim. Using Learning Opportunities and the Calm Signal fall under this category. Procedures are simply an established way of doing something. Procedures included in this book include the Lock-It-In procedure for effective transitions, the Student Nickname procedure, and the Class Rule procedure, just to name a few.

Through the implementation of these procedures and strategies, this manual teaches how to build relationships, develop empathy, give away control in a healthy way, and hold students accountable through appropriate consequences. Using these tools allows students to think and work in a relaxed environment with the highest standards of behavior, free from anger, threats, punishments, suspensions, and expulsion, and as a consequence, teachers are able to guide their students to become successful, prosocial children who will grow into successful, prosocial adults.

The procedures and strategies taught in this book are organized into two skill sets: building positive relationships with students and sharing control with students in healthy ways.

Building Positive Relationships with Students

I had been taught that building relationships with students was a great way to gain control in the classroom; however, I wasn't specifically taught procedures to

build those relationships. I decided to create these procedures myself and developed a way to establish them as routines within the first three weeks of the school year. After those three weeks, I never had to think about them again, because the students themselves maintained them.

The procedures and established routines allowed me to create a classroom where my students loved to be. They knew that no one was going to hurt them. They felt like their classroom was their turf. They knew that we were all on the same team, that we were family.

To be clear, I built relationships by using procedures—not just by “being nice.” Being nice to difficult students, by itself, is nearly worthless. Difficult kids will act out more when you go out of your way to be nice. Challenging students usually have trust and self-esteem issues, and they will test you by exhibiting negative behaviors to see if you truly like them and if you are able to place limits on them—something that they desperately need and want.

I have found that it is impossible to build relationships with 25 to 35 students in a classroom just by “winging it.” That is, it’s impossible to build relationships just by being nice enough in any given situation that you don’t damage relationships. My difficult students had experienced too much success getting what they wanted through argument, aggression, and manipulation for me to be able to build a positive relationship while tolerating these negative behaviors.

That’s why this manual describes how to build relationships through procedures that train students to exhibit positive behaviors. Establishing these procedures as routines creates an environment where all students feel the safety and ownership necessary for them to be prosocial members of their classroom who are ready to learn.

This manual also explicitly details strategies for building relationships that can be used under specific circumstances. For example, particularly difficult students in functional classrooms may find themselves in the middle of an emotionally positive Bizarro Lecture when they do something particularly wonderful. Effective teachers can use Strategic Noticing to reinforce positive behaviors by noticing them (see Chapter 4), as well as Extreme Respect strategies to model the exemplary behaviors that are expected in a functional classroom.

Used cumulatively, these Relationship-Building Procedures and Strategies are half of the necessary tools for creating a safe, loving, calm, and nurturing environment.

Sharing Control in a Healthy Way

Well-meaning teacher education professors often advise their pre-service teachers to share control with their students. This is good advice, and you'll find that you can either give control to students on your terms, or they will take it on theirs. This is a well-researched dynamic (McCombs, 2010). However, explicit and systematic instruction as to *how* to do this in a classroom has been difficult to find—until now.

When I first started teaching, I had no idea how to share control, or what control I was supposed to share, or when I was supposed to share it. So I ended up doing what most teachers do: I hoarded the control. This is what teachers typically do when they have a large number of difficult students provoking power struggles. With no training, and with no procedures in place, I felt that I had to hold on to as much control as I could because I felt so out of control. Very quickly, I found myself barking orders in a desperate attempt to gain or maintain that control: “Sit down! Be quiet! Stand up! Line up! Work harder! Pay attention!”

It was exhausting at the time, and it is exhausting to think about now.

Every time I took control away from a challenging student, the student tried to get it back; hence, the term “power struggle.” Sometimes, students would try to regain control through overt aggression (e.g., swearing at me, throwing a chair). Sometimes, they would use passive aggression (e.g., pretending not to hear me, not turning in assignments). Either way, trying to take control away from my students trapped me in power struggles that I was destined to lose—because you never win a power struggle with a child. That’s a fundamental concept we’ll come back to in later chapters.

The Control-Sharing Strategies in this manual, such as Gentle Guidance Interventions and Delayed Learning Opportunities (DLOs), are highly effective and allow you to share control in appropriate ways. They are supported and maintained through explicit, systematic procedures through which you elicit the positive behaviors you want by giving away the control you don’t need.

This manual teaches you how to establish Control-Sharing Procedures as routines, alongside the Relationship-Building Procedures, in the first three weeks of the school year. After that time, implementation of the procedures will require little effort on your part because, again, the students themselves will maintain the routines. Students take ownership over a classroom environment in which they feel safe and trusted enough to learn.

Consequences Within Procedures

Building relationships and sharing control makes it very likely that even the most difficult students will be cooperative most of the time. However, even the best-behaved students have bad days. When students slip up and forget to follow the procedures, or in the first weeks, when students are more likely to deliberately challenge the procedures, you must deliver appropriate consequences with empathy.

To make it as easy as possible to be calm but assertive, consequences are woven into the procedures themselves. These consequences within the procedures are called Procedural Learning Opportunities or PLOs. By holding students accountable through appropriate consequences, students will learn that, although we love them and will grant them their fair share of control, we are in charge. Consequences for not being cooperative and not following classroom procedures are systematically and explicitly taught throughout this book.

A Realistic Book for Real-World Classrooms

I wrote this book because it was the book that I needed but did not have when I started teaching. I knew that my students needed to work hard, treat me well, and treat one another well. I think I even knew that my students would never behave any better than I did. The conundrum for me was the same problem that other teachers, particularly those working with difficult students, face: you cannot be the teacher you want to be if you do not know how to get your students to exhibit prosocial behaviors in the classroom. Teachers who spend every day dealing with antisocial behaviors cannot themselves sustain the positive behaviors that they want to model for their students. Rather, they end up exhibiting the same negative behaviors that they want to stop, thus perpetuating the cycle of dysfunctional, antisocial behavior.

To gain students' cooperation in the classroom, teachers must create an environment where prosocial, positive, and functional behaviors are consistently used and modeled by both teachers and students. To do so, we need to understand two facts. First, children have a strong need for quality relationships in general and with an authority figure specifically. Second, children, like all people, have a strong need for control and will rebel or resist when their control needs aren't met. I needed a realistic book that taught me how to use Relationship-Building and Control-Sharing Procedures and Strategies in real-world classrooms with real-life students.

So I wrote it.

The Classroom Behavior Manual

Note that the title of this book does not involve the terms “student behavior,” “behavior management,” or even “behavioral leadership.” This manual is not primarily about student behavior. Positive student behaviors are desired outcomes. This manual does not concentrate on outcomes; it concentrates on inputs. The inputs are the educator behaviors: what exactly do educators do to create a prosocial classroom? When you use the strategies and procedures as explicitly taught in this book, student behaviors will be more positive so that educators can be calm and regulated enough to behave in such a way that creates a high “behavioral ceiling,” or the behavioral level of the classroom’s teachers: students can only aspire to attain the behavioral level of the adults around them. The procedures and strategies in this book will help educators behave like the people they would like their students to become. This is the manual for creating a fully functional environment where everyone’s behavior is prosocial, and no one’s behavior is antisocial.

Only within this environment can teachers succeed. And only within this environment can students achieve and thrive.

Don’t Just Read This Book

Please don’t just read this book. It’s a manual: use it. Use it to put into place procedures and strategies that allow you to be calm and assertive with even the most difficult students.

Procedures: Go at the Prescribed Pace—or Slower

You may be tempted to try to consume this book’s content rapidly and implement every single procedure and strategy immediately. Don’t. The best way to use this material is to implement the procedures according to the “First Three Weeks of School” schedule (see page 100). Do not try to go faster than prescribed. You may, however, need or want to go more slowly, because either you are uncomfortable following the schedule, or your school requires more academic accountability during this time. Go at the pace with which you are comfortable. Don’t openly defy your administration just to be faithful to the suggestions in this book.

Strategies: Pick and Choose

In contrast to procedures, the strategies outlined in this book can be used as needed or as opportunities arise. I recommend experimenting with one or two

strategies per day rather than trying to memorize all of them and deciding which to use on the fly. As a teacher, you already juggle too much information at any given moment.

Here's my advice on how to learn and use the strategies:

1. Read the book.
2. Ignore all strategies you don't want to use. Never use them.
3. Write down each strategy that you like on a sticky note or sheet of paper.
4. For the first two weeks, before you start your school day, choose two strategies to use.
5. Each day, place a note listing the day's strategies on your desk or table.
6. After the first two weeks, start incorporating more strategies each day—or continue to only use two per day, if that's what you're comfortable with.

By the end of the first three weeks, you should have a good command of all the strategies that you want to use so that you can deploy them as needed.

Again, I cannot emphasize enough that you should ignore any strategies and procedures that you don't like or that you feel don't fit your personality, teaching style, students, or class environment. Pick the ones that feel and work best for you.

Keep Doing What You Have Been Doing

This may seem like a strange suggestion for a behavior manual to make. If you have teaching experience, keep using any and all systems and techniques that you feel are effective. Methods and processes that have worked for you in the past may continue to work for you in the future. After all, the entire reason I'm writing this manual is because I have found methods that work. Perhaps you have, too. You may even want to continue to use methods that don't work (and you have plenty of these, or else you would not be reading this book) as a security blanket. Your stress level is an important variable in being able to be empathetic while holding kids accountable. As your confidence in the procedures and strategies grows, and as you see that the consequences within the procedures are far more effective than any other system, you will be able to abandon the less than effective methods that you have been using in an attempt to elicit positive behaviors.

The Behavior Chart: How and When to Throw It Away

One of the most common ineffective means of eliciting positive behaviors is a behavior chart. For most teachers, behavior charts fall squarely in the category of "things I do that I know do not work but that make me feel slightly less out of control."

You can keep using this tactic, if you feel you need it, but as you learn and deploy the procedures and strategies taught in this book, you will eventually find that you can set it aside.

For those who hold on to the behavior chart after the start of a new school year, I offer a particularly effective way to discard it (when you're ready) that will support relationship building with your students:

1. Wait for a moment when behavior in the room is perfect. A completely silent moment during quiet work time, such as the Silent Work procedure (see Chapter 8), is an optimal moment.
2. With emotion and volume, say something like this: "Team Awesome [see Class Nickname procedure, Chapter 5], I'm sorry to interrupt you. I'm looking around, and I must tell you that I owe you an apology. Not one of you is causing a problem for anyone. You are being fantastic and taking care of business. I feel like this behavior chart that I have been using is silly. I think that it's for people who can't manage their own behavior, and I see that you can. I'm so sorry that I have been insulting your intelligence by using this thing. It is unnecessary. You all obviously don't need it."
3. Choose the most difficult student who has been exhibiting the most positive behaviors lately and continue: "Dontonio, would you please rip that thing off the wall?"
4. Allow each student to throw away any clips or cards that you have been using. Feel free to let them break or tear the cards, clips, or assorted doodads first.

This Book Is Not Another "Thing"

Any teacher who has been around for more than a few years has seen "things" (e.g., curriculum, methods, ideologies, processes) come and go. Many of us have been around long enough to see "things" come, go, and come back again (often with different names). Eventually, many educators (myself included) have stopped trying to learn new "things."

Why have we stopped trying?

- We can't possibly add another "thing" to what we're already required to do.
- We don't have any more room in our brains.
- We know that if we ignore the latest "thing" for long enough, it will go away.

What makes this manual different? “Things” take time and energy away from you. They’re distractions that produce few, if any, positive results. They are easily discarded and replaced. This manual is not a “thing” because it does not take time and energy away from you, it does produce positive results, and it cannot be easily discarded by your administrators.

For every minute you spend reading this book and using its procedures and strategies, you will get hours back by training your students to exhibit positive, prosocial behaviors so you can teach and they can learn.

I Promise

Over the past two decades serving in the field of education, I have worked in and visited hundreds of schools. During that time, I have learned a universally true lesson: there is nothing more valuable than the time and energy of an educator. Demands are put on educators that are unfair and unrealistic. These demands make it difficult to manage the daily business of the classroom—business that extends well beyond the classroom walls.

I promise that this book will not be another demand. It will not make your life more difficult.

I promise that you will get back the valuable time and energy you spend reading this book many times over.

I promise that by adopting these procedures and strategies, you will expend minimal effort to train students to be hard-working, prosocial people.

I promise that this book will help you experience the empowerment and joy that come with being successful at teaching students.

I promise that creating this positive classroom environment will dramatically improve your life and the lives of your students.

Let’s get to it.

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About the Author



Scott Ervin has worked with kids for more than two decades. Most of his experience has been spent working with extremely difficult, at-risk, abused, and neglected kids. For the last 11 years of his teaching career, he requested that all of the most difficult kids in the grade be placed in his classroom as a teacher and in his building as a principal and superintendent. For the last five of those years, he worked at one of the largest primary schools in the United States and requested that all of the most difficult kids out of 400 3rd graders be placed on his class roster. In addition, students in other classrooms whose behavior made it impossible for others to learn in their assigned classrooms throughout the year were all moved to Scott's room.

Scott has served as a principal, superintendent, and discipline specialist. The classrooms in which he has worked had poverty rates between 84 and 98 percent. As a consultant and founder of Ervin Educational Consulting, Scott has traveled the country teaching parents and educators alike how to be calm and assertive with children.

Scott has a Bachelor of Arts in political science and a master's degree in education. He has taught classroom management as an adjunct professor at Antioch University Midwest and as a visiting lecturer at Ohio University, University of Dayton, and Wright State University. He also writes a syndicated newspaper column, "Ask the Kid Whisperer." To hire a behavioral consultant or for more information, go to www.ervineducationalconsulting.com or email support@ervineducationalconsulting.com.