

## SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) Edutopia Magazine

### How to Guide Young Learners to Follow the Rules

Tips for helping preschool students understand expected classroom behaviors and develop their social skills.

By [Megan Tavares](#)

June 27, 2022

Dr. Ross W. Greene's quote, "[Kids do well if they can](#)," has been a guiding principle in my social work practice, a North Star that's kept me on course during the difficult moments that arise when working with young children in preschool. When students appear to willfully disregard rules and expectations, it's understandable for educators to feel confused and frustrated and to think of students as being oppositional. But if early childhood educators focus on the idea that kids do well if they can, they'll find that a student's "oppositional" behavior is actually valuable information about the student's "**ability**" to follow classroom rules and expectations.

***Young learners want to follow the rules and will—if they can. And if they aren't able to yet, you can feel confident in knowing they can be taught how.***

### RULE FOLLOWING IS A TEACHABLE SOCIAL SKILL

Rules are prescribed guides for expected behavior. One of the clearest examples of a prescribed guide for conduct in preschool are the expectations for circle time: looking eyes, listening ears, quiet mouths, hands in lap, and legs criss-cross applesauce.

I've consistently observed teachers saying "Give me five" during circles as a cue for students to ready their bodies and as a reminder to maintain whole-body listening when struggling. It can seem, however, that having students comply with the expectation of "Give me five" is often in service of having a calm, quiet circle in which academic learning can take place. Yet understanding and gaining the ability to follow classroom rules is also a skill set that needs to be taught. The expectations of being quiet, paying attention, waiting our turn to speak, and having gentle hands are social skills presented in a developmentally appropriate and engaging way.

Social skills are necessary for enjoying relationships, effectively communicating with others, collaborative problem-solving, and navigating the rules and expectations of society. As early childhood educators, we can patiently guide young learners, providing

them with a nurturing and safe space to learn and practice these skills in a structured setting.

## **PLAYING GAMES IS AN EXERCISE IN SELF-REGULATION**

Play-based learning gives educators many natural opportunities to teach students about following rules and expectations. Developmentally appropriate board games, such as Candy Land, Chutes and Ladders, and Yeti in My Spaghetti, are a great way to have children practice turn taking, waiting patiently, and following the game directions.

I play these games individually with students who need extra support in regulating enough to wait for their turn, manage their frustration when they lose, or understand the logistics of the game. While playing, I offer specific, positive praise and make sure to say that it's fun to play with someone who follows the rules of the game. **(These are also good games to have on hand for aftercare programs.)**

When preschoolers play, tempers can flare easily, making it harder for children to remain regulated enough to follow the rules. Inevitably, one student attempts to skip ahead or take someone's turn. I've found that providing positive guidance and framing cheating as a choice that comes with a natural consequence—"I know playing by the rules doesn't always feel fun. You can keep cheating, but your friends might not want to play with you. Or you can play the right way and keep playing with them"—is often enough to get the game back on track.

## **MODEL EXPECTED BEHAVIORS FOR YOUNG LEARNERS**

Modeling the expectations of the classroom is also an effective strategy. In one of the classrooms I support, the teacher and I created a class promise in collaboration with the students. One of the biggest challenges for us is the student noise level, and I often have to raise my voice just to be heard. When this happens, I ask open-ended questions to encourage thinking about our class promise. "How come Ms. Megan has to raise her voice right now?" I follow this up by telling them that I need to follow our promise too, and model using my inside voice.

Other well-known strategies are also helpful, such as telling children what we want them to do (walking feet versus running) or offering visual supports that use both text and images to show children what the expectations are. You can display posters or cue cards strategically around the classroom to reinforce expectations and problem-solving strategies in a multisensory way. In one of the classrooms I support, I often bring students over to the problem-solving strategies board that I created to show them what

the expected behavior looks like, which makes it easier for them to understand what they need to do.

## **CONSIDER WHETHER THE RULES ARE APPROPRIATE AND BE FLEXIBLE**

*It's important for educators to be curious about why a child isn't following the rules. Are the rules developmentally appropriate? Are they inclusive? For some children, an expectation such as whole-body listening isn't possible for a variety of reasons.*

Many of the children I work with have been impacted by chronic toxic stress and other adverse childhood events, making self-regulation difficult in a preschool setting. I've also worked with children who have developmental delays and need additional support and accommodations to successfully meet expectations. Using flexible seating (wobble chairs, cube chairs, and balance balls) for children who might have gross motor concerns and allowing students to use a fidget if having still hands is a challenge during circle time are just two examples of how offering accommodations makes it easier for students to meet classroom expectations.

*Being curious about our students and flexible with how rules and expectations are followed can sometimes be an educator's most effective strategy.* Many of my students need extra support to meet expectations around keeping hands to themselves and staying regulated during circle time. I noticed that one student in particular frequently engaged in sensory-seeking behaviors, such as running around the room, rough play with others, and not being aware of pushing his chair in too hard. When other children got too close to him, he became overstimulated and used his hands to communicate his need for space.

With this new knowledge, we worked together to develop a script he could use when he felt uncomfortable, and we role-played so that he could practice using this language. We also played board games together so that he'd have natural opportunities to practice self-regulation strategies. I worked with his teacher to move his seat to the back of the group, which gave him access to a weighted lap pad that provided the sensory input his brain and body needed to stay regulated during circle time. Over time, it was much easier for this student to follow classroom rules because he had the skills and support to follow them.

**By teaching students how they can follow the rules, early childhood educators set young children up for success, giving them an opportunity to do well.**