

## Class Meetings

*We can teach responsibility only by giving the pupils opportunities to accept responsibilities themselves.* Rudolf Dreikurs<sup>1</sup>



**"We put our chairs in a circle,  
and started talking, and the next thing  
I knew we solved the problem."**

We believe there could be peace in the world if every teacher facilitated daily class meetings, (and every family had weekly family meetings). We feel passionate about the benefits of class meetings. We love hearing that research (see below) validates our position, but we feel even more gratified to hear from teachers who experience the joy and benefits of the skills kids learn by participating in class meetings.

Many teachers have found that class meetings make their job much easier because they gain a whole classroom full of problem-solvers. The many skills students learn during class meetings are practiced throughout the day to create a cooperative classroom atmosphere.

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Dreikurs, M.D., and Pearl Cassel, *Discipline Without Tears*, Dutton, NY, p. 78)

Notice we said, “skills kids learn.” These skills are not learned overnight, any more than academic skills are learned over night. They must be taught and learned. Students learn, retain, and use the skills taught during class meetings (as important as math, reading, and science) when they are held daily. Some solutions don’t last forever, and require repeated practice with problem solving.

When Jane was an elementary school counselor and was first learning and teaching about class meetings, she would tell teachers to prepare for a month of hell because it takes time for students to learn the skills required for successful class meetings. However, the month of hell is no longer part of the process if you take time for training in the “8 Essential Skills” before engaging in class meetings to solve “real” problems. These 8 Essential Skills (described in detail in *Positive Discipline in the Classroom*) are.<sup>2</sup>

1. Form a Circle quickly, quietly, and safely.
2. Practice Compliments and Appreciations.
3. Respect Differences.
4. Use Respectful Communications Skills.
5. Focus on Solutions.
6. Role-play and Brainstorm.
7. Use the Agenda and Class Meeting Format.
8. Understand and use the Four Mistaken Goals Chart.

Some students learn each of the eight essential skills for class meetings in just a few days. Others might need to spend a week or more practicing each skill. While learning the essential skills for class meetings, students are learning social-emotional skills, such as respect for self and

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<sup>2</sup> Activities for teaching these skills can be found in *Positive Discipline in The Classroom*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition.

others, listening to each other, brainstorming together as they focus on solutions, critical thinking, accountability, resiliency (by practicing that mistakes are opportunities to learn) and all the other characteristics and life skills needed for successful living.

### **Tool in Action from Atlanta, Georgia**

We had a class meeting where we brainstormed about interruptions (students making noises, comments, etc.) One student said, "I know I'm doing it too, but it's so hard to stop!"

I have noticed that, although it is a constant struggle, they have become more patient with each other and say, "Please stop," more often than saying unkind things like, "Shut up," when someone is making noise.

One of the benefits I didn't foresee was their developing a little more empathy for one another's struggles with attention.

*Elise Albrecht, 5th Grade Teacher The Howard School*

### **Tool in Action from Mission Viejo, California**

Today's class meeting accomplished everything in five minutes! I was actually concerned because there was nothing on the agenda to discuss. There hasn't been for two weeks! When I questioned them on it they informed me that they are able to handle everything on their own now and usually do.

Ah sweet success! It's good to know they have truly embodied the principles they've been taught and apply them to their life now at this point.

*Joy Sacco, 3rd Grade Teacher, Carden Academy, Certified Positive Discipline Trainer*

### **Tool in Action from San Bernardino, California**

Last Saturday I was at a former student's wedding reception and ran into many of my old students. One girl said the most interesting thing to me:

Student: I have so many good memories of your class:

Me: Yes, we had fun didn't we.

Student: I have stayed friends with so many of those kids in your class.

Me: That is great.

Student: Over the years we have had our ups and downs but you know from those class meetings we learned how to solve our problems. I am so glad you taught us.

Me: (I felt overwhelmed when she said that—so grateful that I had learned about class meetings.)

Student: I am getting my Doctorate degree now. And so is Mari (another student I had).

Me: You are doing well for only being 22-years-old.

I couldn't get that student out of my mind. So you see, all because of *Positive Discipline* and class meetings, I was successful with some little five-year-olds.

*Colleen Petersen, Retired School Teacher*

### **Tool in Action from Ecuador**

During our classroom meetings (which occur three times a week), we first acknowledge each other with compliments and appreciations. In this part of the meeting students feel important and recognized for their talents, accomplishments, and more. We then revisit previous solutions to problems to check in with students to determine if the solution worked. If the first agreed upon solution did not work, students brainstorm more ideas. After revisiting previous solutions, we focus on our agenda with any problems that need to be discussed while focusing on possible solutions. The students involved in the problem identify one of the suggested solutions that they are willing to try. We wrap up our meeting by discussing future plans.

Positive Discipline has empowered my students, created a more positive and respectful environment, helped to develop positive characteristics in students that serve them today to be successful academically and socially, and will continue to serve them well in the distant future.

*Jeremy Mathis, 4th Grade Teacher*

### **Tool in Action from Seattle, Washington**

About 2 weeks ago, students in a 5th grade class started bringing some silly putty to school and used it to occupy their hands instead of fidgeting. This week, the silly putty became a bit of a problem (being used inappropriately) and was put in “time out” on a shelf. Then it disappeared. For one girl in particular (I’ll call her Liz), who had saved her money to buy the silly putty, this was pretty stressful.

On Tuesday they held a class meeting, talked about mistakes, and how embarrassing it would be to acknowledge you did it. They came up with the solution of putting the silly putty back anonymously. Nothing happened.

Then prime suspect (I’ll call him Clyde) “found” the silly putty in a cupboard but denied having taken it. The class was suspicious, but the teacher set very clear expectations that no one would be blamed without evidence.

Wednesday morning, shortly before their scheduled class meeting, students were working in small groups and Clyde blurted out, “All right, I did it!”

Not everyone heard this, but Liz did, and she asked to meet privately with Clyde. The two of them walked off to an empty room after requesting that adults not be present.

When I came for an observation the teacher pulled me aside and expressed concern. He shared the history that Liz and Clyde were off talking, and he didn’t know exactly when they were coming back. Not only that, Clyde’s name was on the class meeting agenda again, and the teacher didn’t feel it was appropriate, given the events of the morning, that issues with Clyde be

discussed again. (Good intuition!) I suggested that they hold the class meeting, but just do compliments. That was the plan.

Liz and Clyde arrived just as the class meeting started and found places to sit in the circle. A student started the meeting and chose to do the compliments as “give or get”, with no pass. Clyde was about the 3rd student, and he sat kind of crumpled over himself. He sat up when he got the talking stick and complimented Liz for being a friend and listening to him.

Liz was about 4 students later and complimented Clyde for being a good friend and listening to her. Two students later, James (who had put Clyde on the agenda this time) complimented Clyde for being a good friend. Then another student and another complimented Clyde. One compliment was “I compliment you for being a friend, and I trust you.” Clyde, by now, was uncurling himself and had a tear running down his cheek.

Several students asked for a compliment and could pick the student to give them a compliment to them (per our "give, get, pass" guidelines for compliments). Clyde began to slowly raise his hand. The next student asked Clyde if his hand was up and chose him to offer the compliment. Then more compliments for Clyde followed. The last one was from a boy who said, “I compliment you for being open with your emotions, the happy ones and the unhappy ones.” After the meeting, one of the students remarked under his breath after the circle, “Clyde got nine compliments!” (in a class of about 25.) No adult suggested this. No adult commented. It just happened.

The teacher reminded the students that they had had several struggles and each time they had been up to the challenge—and that he felt that they had once again met a significant challenge successfully. He told them that the problem-solving part of the class meeting would happen at the next meeting, and they ended with a brief fun rhythm activity.

When I met with the teacher afterwards, we both sat stunned for a bit. He saw this as a watershed meeting for his class. Partly because of how they welcomed Clyde back in, partly because James initiated the repetitive compliments (James had been struggling with Clyde all year), partly because of the courage modeled by Clyde and Liz.

Because this teacher had “prepared the ground” by teaching about mistakes, about differences, compliments, and encouragement, these students had the skills they needed to rally like this. Wow.

*Jody McVittie, MD, Certified Positive Discipline Lead Trainer*

### **Tool Tips:**

1. Schedule daily class meetings.
2. Place an agenda in a visible place that is easily accessible for students. When students have a challenge, they can put it on the agenda. Or, give a choice: “Would it help you to put this on our class meeting agenda, or to use the wheel of choice to solve this problem?”
3. Take dictation for younger students at specified times, such as just before recess.
4. Start every meeting with compliments.
5. Brainstorm for solutions to agenda items—write them all down.
6. Ask involved students to choose a solution that works for them.
7. Follow up during in a week to see how the solution worked.

### **What the Research Says:**

Research shows that when students feel a sense of belonging and connection at school, academic performance improves, as does social and emotional learning.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>3</sup> Sulkowski, Demaray, and Lazarus (2015). *National Association of School Psychologists*.

Leachman and Victor report that class meetings help students develop a sense of responsibility, empathy and self-motivation. Research by Dewey, Bowlby, Ainsworth and Glasser explains the success and benefits of class meetings.<sup>4</sup> Class meetings are one of the best ways to provide experiences for students to feel belonging at school. Specifically, research indicates that class meetings can enhance relationships, increase effective communication, and improves problem solving skills as well as help facilitate a positive, caring school climate for learning.<sup>5</sup> Teachers in a study conducted by Edwards, Mullis, and Keegan<sup>6</sup> reported that class meetings took care of problems proactively while validating students' concerns. Class meetings led to less disruptions and conflict as reported by these researchers. Urban public school teachers in this study shared:

“Students are meeting discipline expectations and learning to value who they are.”

“We’ve had a more positive, cohesive group and better school attendance.”

“Class meetings bring up simmering problems before they boil”

“There has been a tolerance for others and social bonding.”

“I think less time is spent dealing with other situations in class. Usually kids will wait until the class meeting to discuss problems.”

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Retrieved from <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/40/7/connecting-students.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Leachman & Victor. (2003). *Educational Leadership*, 60, 64-68.

<sup>5</sup> Loukas, Roalson, & Herrera. (2010). *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 20, 13-22.

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, Mullis, and Keegan. (2005). *North American Society of Adlerian Psychology*.