Class Meetings

We can teach responsibility only by giving the pupils opportunities to accept responsibilities themselves.

Rudolf Dreikurs 1

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1 Rudolf Dreikurs, M.D., and Pearl Cassel, Discipline Without Tears, Dutton, NY, p. 78)
Many teachers have found that class meetings make their job much easier because they gain a whole classroom full of problem-solvers. The skills students learn during class meetings are practiced throughout the day to create a cooperative classroom atmosphere. There are 8 Essential Skills that children must learn to insure successful class meetings.2

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 Brainstorming.
7. Use the Agenda and Class Meeting Format.
8. Understand and use the Four Mistaken Goals Chart.

While learning the essential skills for class meetings, students are learning the social-emotional skills so important for successful living, such as respect for self and 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 Card in Action: (Retired Kindergarten Teacher)

Last Saturday I was at a former students wedding reception and ran into many of my old students. One girl and she 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.)

2 Activities for teaching these skills can be found in Positive Discipline in The Classroom, 4th edition.
Student: I am getting my Doctorate degree now. And so is Mari (another student I had).
Me: You are doing good 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, San Bernardino, CA*

**Tool card in Action: 4th Grade Teacher, 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, and 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, Ecuador*

**Tool Card in Action: 5th Grade Class in Seattle**

About 2 weeks ago, students 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, “Alright, 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, and 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 was 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. Clyde began to partly 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. 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 who 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, Executive Director, Sound Discipline. (Www.SoundDiscipline.org)_

**Teacher Tool in Action: 1st and 2nd grade reading teacher in Atlanta**

Children who are not achieving academic benchmarks in school come to the classroom environment often withdrawn, defensive and without a sense of belonging to a learning community. Working with the lowest achieving first and second grade reading students in an independent school setting has provided me the opportunity to not only remediate their reading skills but also to address the underlying social and emotional concerns that are vital to learning as well. When these children, who are most often very capable but suffer from learning differences that cause traditional reading development to be challenging, receive appropriate instruction for their learning needs along with a sense of belonging and support that the Positive Discipline program promotes the results can be impressive.

Even though I am only with my students for a small portion of the school day I make Class Meetings a priority during our time together. Gathering in a circle for these meetings is so important as the circle represents equality and space for all.

I believe that two components of our time together in this circle have directly contributed to my students' success in reading. First, we greet each other focusing on eye contact and smiling as we welcome each other to the group. We shake hands also when greeting one another incorporating the sense of touch into our connections.

This simple act of greeting has increased the sense of belonging and connection for my children in ways that I never expected. Greeting one another centers both myself and the
Positive Discipline in the Classroom Tool Cards   Jane Nelsen and Kelly Gfroerer

children and allows learning to occur. Second, we practice giving each other compliments during our Class Meetings. Some examples of compliments my children have offered are: "Sam is very kind to others. He likes to learn a lot, and he helps people when they have trouble," and "Meg is always nice and always has a smile on her face and always helps people who are struggling." The genuine nature of the children's compliments for one another only helps to create connection, belonging and trust within our group. From this positive beginning teaching my students to read flows naturally in a way I believe it would not without this building of each child's sense of self.

**Tool Tips**

1. Schedule regular class meetings. Students learn, retain, and use the skills taught during class meetings (as important as math, reading, and science) when they are held daily. These skills take time, practice, and repetition.

2. 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 learning each skill.

3. Create an agenda in a visible place that is easily accessible for students. When students have a challenge, they can put it on the agenda.

4. Start the meetings 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. They can report on how it is working during the next class meeting.

7. Some solutions don’t last forever, and require repeated practice with problem solving.

**What the Research Says:**

Research shows that when students feel a sense of belonging and connection at school, academic performance increases as does social and emotional learning.\(^3\) Furthermore, Leachman

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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. 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 problem solving as well as help facilitate a positive, caring school climate for learning. Teachers in a study conducted by Edwards, Mullis, and Keegan 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. Statements made by teachers in this study working in a large urban public school setting include:

“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.


1 Lechman & Victor. (2003). Educational Leadership, 60, 64-68.