

# The Secret to Effective Classroom Management

It has been a long time (since February, 2013 actually) since I last sent a newsletter. A fact I feel a bit guilty about. When you read more below, you'll see why I've been absent for the better part of a year. But for now, let's talk about the secret to classroom management.

In all honesty, there is no *one, single* secret to effective classroom management. The reality is that there are a lot of methods, techniques, and approaches that are good for both students and teachers. What do almost all of them (the ones that are good for **both** students and teachers) have in common? They teach students the skills of self-regulation; they don't rely solely on rules, rewards, and consequences. Here is the big picture: If we want well-managed classrooms where students are polite, engaged, and productive, the best thing we can do is teach students how to manage their own behavior. Forget the behavior charts, the marbles in a jar, the competitions, and the reliance on rules and focus on teaching students how to manage their own behavior. If you want a well-managed classroom, teach students how to control themselves.

That leads to a few questions: *What is self-regulation, exactly? How important is the development of self-regulation skills? and What strategies are effective at helping students develop those skills?*

First, let's briefly tackle what it is. Sometimes referred to as an executive function process in the brain, self-regulation can be thought of as the ability to control and direct one's behavior. A review of the research will reveal related terms like self-control, self-direction, self-monitoring, self-management, and even willpower. Regardless of the exact definition, they all have this in common – self-control is the ability to direct and control one's behavior and to make choices that are in your own and other's long-term best interest.

How important is self-regulation? Well, as teachers we don't need a mountain of scientific research to confirm what we've known for years. Students who are better at controlling their own behavior, delaying gratification, and appropriately dealing with the multitude of distractions in the classroom do better in school and in life. Students who can control themselves get better grades, get in trouble less often, have more friends, and report greater satisfaction with their education (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989; Moffitt, 2011; Baumeister & Tierney, 2012). For those of you who would like to learn more about self-regulation and impulse control, Google any of the numerous resources discussing the famous **Marshmallow Test** originally conducted by Walter Mischel. YouTube has some video clips that are informative and entertaining.

With all that said, here is the great news for classroom teachers – self-regulation can be learned. Merely telling students to show self-control is pointless unless they have the resources, knowledge, and skills that allow them to do it. So, here are 4 ways to help students develop self-regulation skills:

1. **Support the Brain** – Without providing a primer on the brain, suffice it to say that the brain is an energy hog. It's only about 2% of a person's body weight but it uses about 20% of the body's total energy consumption. The brain gets its energy from glucose. Whenever someone undertakes a task that requires willpower or self-control, glucose is depleted. If there are low levels of glucose in the brain it can be very difficult to exhibit self-control. So, allow students to eat and drink (to replenish glucose) and increase the amount of physical movement (this can release glucose stored in the liver).
2. **Make it Fun** – Learning self-control doesn't have to be painful and it shouldn't feel like a chore. In fact, if we approach the development of self-regulation skills from the perspective that students have to suffer, we are likely going to be facing some very reluctant students. In order to make it fun, incorporate games like Simon Says and Concentration, use role-playing scenarios where students deal with real-life situations and problems, and engage students with intriguing scenarios and questions.
3. **Improve Working Memory** – Sometimes referred to as short-term memory, working memory has been described as the brain's Post-it note where information is stored for short periods of time as they brain decides what to do with it. The information stored in working memory drives planning, problem-solving, organization, and attention. In order to improve working memory, use spot-the-difference puzzles (click [here](#) for a free site with some good examples), play games like 20 Questions where students have to hold information in working memory, and externalize information such as time limits, guidelines, and directions with visual cues and written reminders.
4. **Do a Room Check** – The physical environment of the classroom can have a tremendous impact on a student's ability to focus and exhibit self-control. Some students, particularly those low in self-regulation are sensitive to what Eric Jensen (2012) refers to as "hot cues". That is, there are things in the environment that can be very difficult to ignore. So, spend some time analyzing the classroom with a keen eye towards things that could be a distraction for students. Consider things like placement of desks and pencil sharpeners, the amount of clutter, and traffic patterns. Ask yourself this question, "Is my room neat, tidy, and organized or cluttered, messy, and overly stimulating?"