



THE  
*Responsive Classroom*<sup>®</sup>  
A P P R O A C H

I N F O R M A T I O N F O R P A R E N T S

*What is the Responsive Classroom approach?*

It is a way of teaching that creates a safe, challenging, and joyful classroom and schoolwide climate for all students. Teachers who use the *Responsive Classroom* approach understand that all of students' needs—academic, social, emotional, and physical—are important. Elementary and middle school teachers create an environment that responds to all of those needs so that your child can do his or her best learning.

The *Responsive Classroom* approach develops teachers' competencies in four key areas:

- n **Engaging Academics**—Teachers create learning tasks that are active, interactive, appropriately challenging, purposeful, and connected to students' interests.
- n **Positive Community**—Teachers nurture a sense of belonging, significance, and emotional safety so that students feel comfortable taking risks and working with a variety of peers.
- n **Effective Management**—Teachers create a calm, orderly environment that promotes autonomy and allows students to focus on learning.
- n **Developmentally Responsive Teaching**—Teachers use knowledge of child development, along with observations of students, to create a developmentally appropriate learning environment.

*How might the Responsive Classroom approach  
look and sound in my child's classroom?*

The *Responsive Classroom* approach offers practical strategies for teaching, rather than formulas telling teachers what they must do in the classroom. Teachers adapt the strategies as needed to address their students' needs, so things may look a bit different in each classroom. But you'll usually see and hear teachers:

- n **Leading a daily Morning Meeting in the elementary setting and a Responsive Advisory Meeting in the middle school setting.** These routines set a positive tone and build a sense of community and belonging while giving students practice in key academic and social skills.
- n **Teaching students the specific skills they need to participate successfully,** from how to respond to a signal for quiet to how to respectfully disagree with a classmate.
- n **Treating mistakes in a positive way.** Teachers see mistakes (in academics and in behavior) as important steps in learning. They encourage students to learn from their mistakes and "try again." They offer support and reteach as needed. At the same time, teachers provide clear expectations for behavior and stop misbehavior quickly so that students can focus on learning.

- n **Using positive language.** Teachers choose words and tone that encourage students to work hard, enjoy learning, and persist through difficulties.
- n **Teaching in ways that build excitement about learning.** Teachers give students some choices in their learning. They also plan active lessons (ones that get students up and moving) and interactive lessons (ones that encourage students to share their information, ideas, and questions).
- n **Giving students opportunities to reflect on their learning.** Teachers ask students to think about what they've learned, both individually and as a group, because doing so helps students learn more and builds community.
- n **Reaching out to parents.** Teachers communicate often with parents and welcome them as partners in their child's education.

### *How do you know it works?*

Over the past thirty years, teachers who use *Responsive Classroom* strategies have reported significant improvements in their students' learning and behavior. And researchers, as well as teachers, have found that students:

- n Achieve higher scores on math and reading tests
- n Have better social skills (listening, disagreeing respectfully, waiting for a turn, etc.)
- n Feel more positive about school, teachers, and peers

### *Where did the Responsive Classroom approach come from?*

A group of public school educators began developing it in 1981, building on the best research about how children learn. Over the years, the approach has been refined to reflect the most current and useful knowledge about children.

### *What social skills do teachers focus on?*

Students learn academics most easily when they have strong social skills that let them take a positive role in classroom life. For example, the social skill of listening respectfully helps students learn from classmates' oral reports, get information from their teacher about how to solve a math problem, and enjoy a book the teacher reads aloud to the class.

Here are some of the specific social skills that teachers focus on throughout the year, with special emphasis during the early weeks of school:

- n Cooperation (working smoothly with others)
- n Assertiveness (confidently putting forth your ideas and opinions)
- n Responsibility (taking charge of yourself and working hard at your learning)
- n Self-control (thinking before acting)
- n Empathy (listening to others and understanding how they might respond to your words or actions)

### *How do teachers teach these skills?*

Teachers understand that students may not come to their classrooms knowing how to take turns, listen, disagree respectfully, walk quietly in a hallway, or do many other things that reflect positive school behavior. To help the students learn, teachers will carefully:

- n Break skills and tasks into small parts
- n Briefly describe the behavior they're looking for
- n Model the behavior
- n Give students plenty of practice and feedback
- n Reteach as necessary throughout the year

### *When do teachers teach these skills?*

Teachers weave social skills teaching into everything the students do—academics, recess, lunch, and even entering and leaving the school building and classroom. During a math lesson, for example, third graders learn how to count money while also learning how to listen respectfully to a classmate's idea for how to solve a problem. During recess, students of all ages learn how to include everyone in their games.

Although teachers help students learn social skills throughout the school year, they focus most strongly on teaching these skills during the early weeks of school. It's during this time that expectations for behavior are clearly laid out and students are taught how to meet these expectations. When teachers take the time to teach and model these skills well in the beginning of the year, they spend less time on behavior problems and more time on learning all year long.

### *What about classroom rules?*

During the early weeks of school, teacher and students create rules based on the students' goals for learning.

Students follow the rules more willingly because they helped to make them. Teachers refer to the rules many times throughout the day and year, helping students understand how following the rules helps everyone to learn. Some schools also have a few basic schoolwide rules that everyone follows in the hallways, lunchroom, and other common spaces.

### *What do teachers do when children break the rules?*

Teachers understand that all students will, at one time or another, test or break the rules. When that happens, teachers discipline firmly but kindly and positively. The goals are (1) to stop the misbehavior as quickly as possible so that the child (and classmates) can get back to learning and (2) to teach the child to reflect on and control his or her own behavior.

The *Responsive Classroom* approach offers teachers many tools to help students control their own behavior and contribute to the classroom community. One very important tool is clear, positive language. When students are just beginning to go off course, teachers use reminding

language (Karen, what should you be doing right now?). When students are clearly misbehaving, teachers use redirecting language (Mike, hands in your lap). And when students are doing well, teachers use reinforcing language (I noticed that you cleaned up very quickly today). Teachers also make sure that the consequences for misbehavior are related to the misbehavior and respectful of the child.

Many teachers also use positive time-out (although the class may decide on a different name, such as take-a-break) to help students regain control when they're just beginning to lose it. Time-out offers students a quick way to calm down, reset, and rejoin the class with dignity— it's not a punishment.

### ***How can I learn more about the Responsive Classroom approach?***

- n Visit the *Responsive Classroom* website: [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)
- n Sign up on the website for the free monthly email newsletter that features articles from the Information Library
- n Follow *Responsive Classroom* on Facebook or Twitter

## **Responsive Classroom – The Guiding Principles**

- **The Social curriculum is as important as the academic one.**
- **How children learn is just as important as what they learn.**
- **The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.**
- **There is a specific set of social skills that children need in order to be successful academically and socially.**
- **Knowing the children we teach is as important as knowing the content we teach.**
- **KNOWING THE PARENTS OF THE CHILDREN WE TEACH IS AS IMPORTANT AS KNOWING THE CHILDREN.**
- **How grown-ups at school work together to accomplish our mission is more important than our individual competence.**

# Classroom Practices That Engage the Principles of Responsive Classroom

## *The First Six Weeks of School*

- **Interactive Modeling:** Teachers actively involve children in purposefully demonstrating and analyzing key behaviors that support both the social and academic curricula.
- **Guided Discovery:** Teachers introduce students to classroom materials in a way that encourages the children to use the materials independently, creatively, and responsibly.
- **Classroom Organization:** Teachers organize materials, furniture, and displays in ways that encourage students' independence, cooperation, productiveness, and positive behaviors.
- **Morning Meeting:** Teachers lead students in a daily gathering that uses a consistent format for friendly greeting, sharing of news, having fun together, and warming up for the day of learning ahead.
- **Academic Choice:** Teachers use children's interests and the powerful learning cycle of planning, working, and reflecting to maximize students' academic growth.
- **Working Collaboratively:** Teachers collaborate with students to develop classroom rules that support everyone's learning and use structured approaches for working together with students to solve academic and social problems.
- **Logical Consequences/Apology of Action:** Teachers respond to misbehavior with consequences that are respectful of the children and supportive of their efforts to learn how to fix their mistakes.
- **Working with Families:** Teachers design avenues for respectful, two-way communication and collaboration with students' families.
- **Teacher Language:** Teachers consciously use words as a professional tool to promote learning, community, and self-discipline.

# A+SEL Competencies

In order to be successful in and out of school, students need to learn a set of social and emotional competencies—cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy, and self-control—and a set of academic competencies—academic mindset, perseverance, learning strategies, and academic behaviors.

## Social & Emotional Competencies

- **Cooperation:** Students' ability to establish new relationships, maintain positive relationships and friendships, avoid social isolation, resolve conflicts, accept differences, be a contributing member of the classroom and school community, and work productively and collaboratively with others.
- **Assertiveness:** Students' ability to take initiative, stand up for their ideas without hurting or negating others, seek help, succeed at a challenging task, and recognize their individual self as separate from the circumstances or conditions they're in.
- **Responsibility:** Students' ability to motivate themselves to take action and follow through on expectations; to define a problem, consider the consequences, and choose a positive solution.
- **Empathy:** Students' ability to "see into" (recognize, understand) another's state of mind and emotions and be receptive to new ideas and perspectives; to appreciate and value differences and diversity in others; to have concern for others' welfare, even when it doesn't benefit or may come as a cost to one's self.
- **Self-Control:** Students' ability to recognize and regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in order to be successful in the moment and remain on a successful trajectory.

## Academic Competencies

- **Academic mindset:** Four self-perceptions influence a student's academic mindset: 1) I belong in this academic community; 2) my effort improves my performance; 3) I can succeed at this work; and 4) I see the value in this work.
- **Perseverance:** Perseverance is a student's tendency to complete assignments in a timely and thorough manner and to the best of their ability, despite distractions, obstacles or level of challenge.
- **Learning Strategies:** Learning strategies are techniques, processes, and tactics a student uses to 1) learn, think, remember, and recall, 2) monitor their own comprehension and growth, 3) self-correct when they are confused or have an error in thinking, and 4) set and achieve goals and manage their time effectively.
- **Academic Behaviors:** Academic behaviors are the ways in which students conduct themselves that support their success in school, including such things as regular attendance, arriving ready to work, paying attention, participating in instructional activities and class discussions, and devoting out-of-school time to studying and completing assignments and projects.

# Social and Academic Learning Go Hand and Hand

Academic learning happens best within a positive social context; therefore, in the *Responsive Classroom* approach, much attention is paid to teaching children positive social skills within the context of daily routines and activities.

In his book, *Teaching With the Brain in Mind*, Eric Jensen points out that the most basic thing we can do to help students learn is to remove threats from their environment, including the social and emotional threats of embarrassment, exclusion, name-calling, and bullying (Jensen 2005). When the social climate is stressful for children, the parts of their brain that deal with perceived threats are engaged and their cognitive capacity actually diminishes. A supportive social and emotional climate is essential for children to be able to think clearly and take in new information.

## **Basic Emotional Needs and the Climate for Learning**

As human beings, we all have basic social and emotional needs that must be met if we are to be free to thrive and learn well. The work of many psychologists, including Alfred Adler, Rudolph Dreikurs, William Glasser, and Edward Deci, confirm that we have strong needs to feel a sense of belonging, a sense of significance, and a sense of fun. A sense of belonging includes feeling welcomed, liked, and accepted by others in the groups we are part of. A sense of significance includes feelings of autonomy and competence. When we feel capable of acting independently and successfully in the world, we perceive ourselves as having a certain amount of power and freedom----a perception that is necessary if we are to live a fulfilled life. The need for fun represents a universal trait of humans----playfulness. The desire and ability to play is the basis for much learning because it allows us to take risks and make mistakes in a low-stakes situation. William Glasser calls fun “the genetic reward for learning” (1999, p. 33) and states, “The day we stop playing is the day we stop learning” (1999, p. 41).

## **Learning Is a Social Activity**

When our students’ fundamental needs for belonging, significance, and fun are met, they are free to engage with others in ways that stretch their academic skills and knowledge. Vygotsky calls this reaching into their “zone of proximal development,” or that space between what they can do on their own and what they can do with help from someone a step or two more skilled (Vygotsky 1934/1986). For example, a child who can’t read a book on her own might be able to read it with a classmate who’s at a higher reading level. The classmate might supply words the child doesn’t know or take turns reading paragraphs with her. The two might discuss their ideas and questions about the book. All this pulls the less skilled child toward more complex reading and deepens the other child’s skills as well. But for this kind of deep, constructive engagement to happen, students need to trust and respect each other.

*Responsive Classroom* strategies help children build that trust and respect because teachers teach the social curriculum as avidly as they teach the academic curriculum. Children do not necessarily come to school knowing how to interact in effective and productive ways, any more than they come to school knowing how to read or solve mathematics problems. Social skills that help children find belonging, significance, and fun in constructive ways must be taught, just as academic skills must be taught. And like academic skills, social skills must be taught as an integral part of the ongoing daily life of classrooms----not as a separate curriculum. When instruction is situated in the current and specific concerns of classroom life, it is more meaningful to children and therefore more powerful.

## Common Developmental Traits by Age

(Adapted from *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4–14*, 3rd edition, by Chip Wood, CRS, 2007)

Age	Physical	Language/Cognitive	Social/Emotional
<b>4</b>	<p>Fine motor skills poorly developed</p> <p>Visual focus on distant objects</p> <p>Need physical activity</p>	<p>Learn through exploratory play and activities that call on large muscles</p> <p>Love being read to</p> <p>Enjoy language and delight in playing with words</p> <p>Short attention span for paper/pencil tasks</p>	<p>Friendly and talkative</p> <p>Check in with adults frequently; need advice/modeling of appropriate behavior</p> <p>Enjoy being with friends but often engage in parallel play</p> <p>Love having “jobs” such as counting, attendance, snack helper</p>
<b>5</b>	<p>Still awkward with small motor activities</p> <p>Able to see close objects best</p> <p>Need physical activity</p>	<p>See one way to do things</p> <p>Imaginative; don’t always distinguish real from imaginary</p> <p>Literal—raining cats and dogs means animals falling from sky</p> <p>Learn through direct experience</p> <p>Concise; use few words in response to questions</p> <p>Concrete, sequential problem-solving</p> <p>Think out loud before acting</p>	<p>Seek attachment and approval; want to “do it right”</p> <p>Later in year might test adult authority</p> <p>Appreciate boundaries</p> <p>Good at partner and solo work</p>
<b>6</b>	<p>Energetic</p> <p>In a hurry</p> <p>Rapid growth</p> <p>Noisy and active</p> <p>Tire easily</p>	<p>Very talkative; love new ideas/asking questions</p> <p>Love “work” but sometimes take on too much</p> <p>Begin to conceptualize past/present and cause/effect</p>	<p>Enthusiastic, energetic, competitive</p> <p>Rush to be first or dawdle to be last</p> <p>Seek friends</p> <p>Easily upset when criticized or discouraged</p> <p>Challenge boundaries and authority</p> <p>Work well in small groups</p>

Age	Physical	Language/Cognitive	Social/Emotional
7	<p>Often keep eyes focused on small, close area</p> <p>Writing is very small</p> <p>Can do quiet work for long periods</p> <p>Increased physical coordination</p>	<p>Good at classifying, for example tasks that involve sorting</p> <p>Learn new words quickly; enjoy writing stories</p> <p>Listen well; speak precisely</p> <p>Value accuracy and completion</p> <p>Enjoy hands-on exploration</p>	<p>Need rules, routines, physical boundaries</p> <p>May be moody or touchy</p> <p>Seek relationships and form close friendships; may change friendships quickly</p> <p>Rely on adults for help and reassurance</p> <p>Work well alone and in pairs</p> <p>Dislike taking risks or making mistakes</p>
8	<p>Increased small and large motor coordination</p> <p>Energetic; play hard, work quickly, tire easily</p> <p>Able to focus on near and far</p> <p>May have growth spurt</p>	<p>Industrious, impatient, and full of ideas; often take on more than they can handle</p> <p>Enjoy exploration but can be nervous about the world</p> <p>Enjoy humor</p>	<p>Adjust well to change; bounce back from disappointments</p> <p>Like to talk and explain ideas</p> <p>Like to work in groups</p> <p>Prefer playing with same-gender peers</p> <p>Concerned with fairness/justice</p>
9	<p>Improved coordination</p> <p>Like to push physical limits; tire easily</p> <p>Restless; can't sit still for long</p> <p>Often report aches and pains</p>	<p>Work hard and pay attention but may jump quickly between interests</p> <p>Want factual explanations; enjoy scientific exploration</p> <p>Difficulty with abstractions such as large numbers</p> <p>Very verbal; love language and word play</p> <p>Industrious and curious</p> <p>Worry about global issues</p>	<p>Competitive; may form cliques</p> <p>Critical of self and others; need encouragement</p> <p>Like to work with a partner of their choice; can work in groups but with lots of arguing</p> <p>Seek answers to big questions</p> <p>Anxious</p>

# Why does *Responsive Classroom* work?

## Our Theory of Change

We know from research and 35 years of educators' self-reports that when teachers consistently use the *Responsive Classroom* approach, behavior problems decrease and students' social and academic skills increase. We also know that teachers feel more efficacious and students feel more engaged in their learning.

But how exactly does this change take place?

Center for Responsive Schools, in collaboration with principal scientist Dr. Herb Turner, is in the process of studying this question and has developed the following theory of change to illustrate the likely impact of the *Responsive Classroom* approach on teacher beliefs and practices and student behavior and outcomes. This research agenda is consistent with the ESSA evidence guidelines.

