All about establishing routine happiness

Modelling good behaviour based around routines can minimise the potential for unruly behaviour and ensure that both pupils and teachers enjoy their school day.

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Meet Naomi. Naomi wanted to be a primary school teacher all her life, so when she finally qualified it was a dream come true. She’s now in her second year. However, there’s a problem: she hates it.

“I just don’t get it. I’m no pushover, I’m not, but their behaviour is so difficult to control. I’ve got to be on them every moment of the lesson. It’s chaos and it’s getting me down.”

Naomi asked me to observe her Year 6 class. The lesson was pretty much as she described it: definite moments of unruly behaviour, particularly around the beginning of the lesson, transitions between activities and the end of the lesson.

Now those three areas should each be governed by some pre-taught routines. Unfortunately, Naomi hadn’t done that. Sure, she’d told the students how she wanted them to behave (in fact, she told them and told them and told them), but she hadn’t actively taught them. And because she hadn’t, she was missing out on the benefits that come from routines. Routines avert misbehaviour, save teaching time and create a learning community. Oh, and they reduce teacher stress too.

So what behaviour should be turned into routines? Simple. Any behaviour that you ask a student to regularly do. So, as with Naomi, definitely beginnings, endings and transitions, but also things like checking planners, collecting in homework, giving out materials, standing in line, putting up your hand, paired work, group work … all of these need to be turned into routines. In other words, standardised (by you), habitual and done on cue.

Naomi decided that the first routine to get right was how students entered the classroom. A good one to do, not least because the beginning of a lesson can set the tone for the rest of it.

To teach this routine, she used the ‘do as I do’ method. It comes in three parts and it can be used to teach any and all classroom routines.

1. You model
The teacher plays the part of a student and shows the class what they need to do. Each step, from beginning to end, is shown in detail. To reinforce the learning, the teacher also gives a running commentary.

This is how Naomi did it. She went out of the room. She opened the door. She said hello to the imaginary teacher standing by the door. She walked quietly to her seat, being careful not to knock into any desk or chairs along the way. She opened up her imaginary schoolbag and placed her imaginary book and pencil case on her desk. She then placed her schoolbag on the floor. As she stood waiting for the teacher’s instruction to sit down, she was careful not to interact with any imaginary students who were also entering the classroom. Throughout the demonstration, she explained what she was doing and why she was doing it.

Next, Naomi modelled how not to do it. Essentially, the opposite of all of the above and done in exaggerated form. There was, as you can imagine, lots of student laughter, some of it the laughter of self-recognition.

2. They model
She then got a student to model the behaviour she wanted. She did not accept an ok-ish job, but went for perfection. If the student failed to say hello, knocked into a desk, forgot to put her bag on the floor, Naomi pointed it out. She didn’t bark orders but kept it on the light side of serious.

Once the student had modelled it with perfection, she got a small group to have a go. The rest of the class watched to see if they did it right. Again there was laughter.

3. All practise

Finally, the whole class now practised the routine. As before, she didn’t stop until she got perfection. Along the way, Naomi praised their concentration and effort.

Ta-da!
Naomi had done it. She had taught the behaviour she wanted to see. However, teaching a behaviour is not the same thing as making it routine. Sure, they knew how to do it, but it wasn’t as yet habitual. For that to happen, Naomi had to make sure that the next lesson (and the next and the next and the next) the new behaviour was performed with perfection.

I went back to see Naomi a month later. As I suspected, the students entered the class just as she’d taught them. She had also worked on transitions and endings, her other two problem areas, and they too were now performed perfectly. She said that once she got one routine right, it became much easier to get the next ones right. She’s even noticed an improvement in the students’ schoolwork. “They know that I want them to behave well, so it follows that I also expect them to work well. It’s just the same steady insistence of high standards.”

I asked her if she was now enjoying teaching. “Oh, yes, definitely,” she said. “I’m still on their behaviour, but now it’s about maintaining perfection, not responding to chaos as it was before.” She smiled. “I suppose you could say that now I’m routinely happy.”

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