

CLASS Teacher Tips



Tips for meeting
developmental needs and
academic demands

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

2. Actively Engaging to Increase Learning

3. A Closer Look at Developmental Needs

4. Achieving Your Goals with When/Then Statements

5. Being in the Moment with the Children

6. Helpful Resources

7. Effective Teachers in Action

Introduction

A note to our readers...

Dear reader,

Standards of Learning. Essential Knowledge and Skills. Common Core. Academic standards are shaping what happens in K-12 classrooms across the country. For many early childhood educators, this focus on increased accountability leaves us wondering how to connect with—and still prepare—the young learners in our care.

If you're working to balance meeting the developmental needs of your students with academic and school-readiness demands, take heart. This e-book is full of concrete approaches you can use that honor your relationships with children and get them ready for the rigors of their K-12 school careers.

Sincerely,
Teachstone

Actively Engaging to Increase Learning



Our Evolving Profession

Twenty-five years ago, quality teaching in early childhood classrooms meant providing a safe place for children to play, with stimulating materials and books to read. Today, we have provided those basics in most early childhood classrooms (hooray!), and our focus has shifted to the *hows* of quality—how we interact with children, how we use time and materials to get the most out of every moment, and how we ensure that children are engaged and stimulated.

When we focus on *how* we teach, in addition to *what*, we become more engaged in children's learning—and we interact more effectively. For a moment, imagine two classrooms down the hall from each other, both with high-quality resources and

materials.

A Less Effective Approach

In the less effective classroom, the teachers sit close to the children but take a less active role. As a result

- Children are comfortable involving the teachers in play, but the teachers miss opportunities to take interactions deeper.
- Some children pull basket after basket off the shelves, playing with each activity for a minute or two before moving on to the next.
- Others hover at the edges, not sure what to do. In between brief conversations with children, the teachers discuss their plans for the rest of the school day.

The result is that the children are safe and comfortable but do not stay engaged with activities for long and seem to wander from one thing to the next.

A More Effective Approach

Now let's take a look at a classroom with more effective interactions—one in which the teachers are actively engaged with the children by

- Being “challenging customers” in the children’s pretend restaurant
- Encouraging children in the paint area to experiment with mixing colors
- Helping a child brainstorm what to do while waiting for his turn on the computer

The children respond with deep engagement and eagerness to contribute their own ideas, and these everyday activities challenge them to engage in social problem solving, create and test hypotheses about the physical world, and learn to regulate their behavior. The more we can engage with children in these ways, the more they’ll learn. So take your seat at the pretend restaurant, and order that cheeseburger!

A Closer Look at Developmental Needs



What to Expect from Three to Five Year Olds

Children aged three to five are developing rapidly. Understanding and responding to their developmental needs provides a powerful boost to their engagement and achievement. This is a time of exciting growth and milestones that can also find children being impulsive, headstrong, distractible, inattentive, and just plain silly! Here's a look at what's typically happening to children at this important age:

- They are becoming more independent.
- They are beginning to understand the thoughts and intentions of others, and use that understanding to engage in more complex, creative play with peers.
- They can describe the world around them, compare and contrast, and make

predictions.

- They are beginning to label their emotions, control their behavior, and persist with challenging tasks.
- They are starting to attach meaning to symbols, which paves the way for early literacy and math skills.

How to Connect with Three to Five Year Olds

With this mix of needs and behaviors, it falls to us to figure out when to lead, when to follow children's leads, and when to gently push children's engagement and learning. After all, our job is to ensure that each child can follow simple directions, pay attention long enough to learn, get along with other children, recognize the letters of the alphabet, and count to 10.

So, we know *what* we need to do. Now, let's take a look at *how*.

How do we get children to pay attention? By choosing developmentally appropriate activities and using active facilitation.

How do we promote social skills? By providing a well-ordered, low-chaos environment with scaffolding and positive adult modeling when needed.

How do we teach early literacy? By providing a language-rich environment, getting children to engage deeply with books, play with new words, and have lots of conversations.

How do we handle an outbreak of silliness? Sometimes we just have to go with the flow and switch out that book reading with a music and movement activity.

Focusing on the *hows* in addition to the *whats* in our classrooms is critical for engaging children. Here's a final example: picture the difference between playing a rhyming game and drilling with phonemic awareness flashcards. You know which approach will be more developmentally appropriate, fun, engaging, and effective—and so do your kids!

Achieving Your Goals with When/Then Statements



The Best Intentions

At the beginning of the year, it can be easy to be filled with good ideas and great intentions. One of my teaching pals always showed up in August with huge, new strategies to try. She'd set goals like

- Get the children to fall in love with reading.
- Send positive postcards to each student twice a month.
- Include hands-on science experiments in centers each week.

And then the paperwork and planning would pile up, a crisis would distract her, or the children would respond to her nifty science experiments by using the materials to make castles and cars.

Big Goals Can Be Overwhelming

After some disappointments, my friend decided that she'd set herself up for failure. Those goals were so big, they quickly became overwhelming (by about the 17th postcard). Research shows that to actually follow through on goals, we need to break them down into specific, concrete steps that are time-specific. Psychologists call these *implementation intentions*, but we prefer the term *when/then statements*, because it helps us remember to keep the goals focused.

When she first learned about when/then statements, my friend was skeptical about how well they'd work. She decided to try them out in her yoga class. She defined her goal: When she was in between poses, then she'd do a sit-up. Here's how she tells it: "At first, I just caught myself *not* doing a sit-up. But within just a few days, I was regularly doing sit-ups between poses, and after a few weeks, it became routine. Now, I don't even have to think about doing sit-ups; I just find myself doing them." The when/then statement helped her first notice what she was doing (or not doing!) and then—finally—change her behavior.

Reframing for Success

So, she returned to her big goal of getting the children to fall in love with reading. By breaking it down into the behavior she wanted to achieve (increase the love of reading) and adding the how and when she could achieve it, she could actually be successful. Here's how she reframed her goal:

When: I read a new book to the children,

Then: I'll read it a second time and let them act out the parts on their carpet squares.

That's much less formidable than the expansive idea of getting all children to love reading! Try reshaping your goals into when/then statements, and put the power of using concrete, time-specific steps to work boosting achievement in your classroom.

Being in the Moment with the Children



Increasing Fun and Learning

It can be hard to stay in the moment in a classroom full of children. But teaching sure is more fun when we connect in this way—and these in-the-moment connections are critical to children’s learning.

This idea of being focused and intentional is central to the CLASS[®] system, and this focus on intentional interactions is catching on. A recent NAEYC-published book, *Powerful Interactions*, suggests that in order for teachers to extend children’s learning, we must first “be present” with children. We need to be aware of our own thoughts and emotions so we’re able to adjust them and tune into the child’s immediate thoughts and needs.

Reminders for Being Present

This isn't easy, especially during busy classroom activities. In order to stay in the moment, we have to set aside thoughts about a) what just happened; b) what happened yesterday or this morning; c) what we have to do next; d) how we need to prepare for later; and e) how we feel about XYZ.

Here are some tips for staying present.

Consciously identify your own feelings and those of the child.

- *I feel _____ right now.* (anxious, worried, rushed, curious, angry, impatient, etc.)
- *This child is _____ right now.* (bored, busy, engaged, timid, etc.)
- *This child feels _____ right now.* (scared, anxious, confident, excited, etc.)

Identify your goals and those of the child.

- *My goal or learning objective for this moment is _____. (to get the child to use words to answer my question, to encourage the child to think and use reasoning to understand the story better, to maintain control of the classroom, etc.)*
- *The goal of the child at this moment is _____. (to get attention, to expend energy, to connect with me, to have some fun, etc.)*

Recognize any disconnects between your goals and those of the child or children so you can quickly adjust.

- *The conflict between the child's goal and my goal is _____. (I want children to sort the colored bears, they want to have a bears party—maybe I can infuse sorting into the party idea, etc.)*

Identify when children become disengaged and employ strategies to re-engage them.

- *How engaged is the child at this moment?* (excited to participate, bored, resistant, etc.)
- *Why is the child disinterested at this moment?* (My lesson is too rote, I am doing too much talking, the child is having a hard time relating to what I am talking about, this is way over his head, this is way too easy, etc.)
- *How can I make this more interesting?* (I could ask more questions, I could use real-life and relatable examples, I could incorporate some music or movement, etc.)

Pay attention to what a child may be thinking and follow the child's cues.

- *What does the child know about what I'm talking about right now? (He's seen this on TV, she has experienced this at home, I can tell she is connecting this idea to something she has seen before, etc.)*

Adjust your feedback to help shape the child's thinking and understanding.

- *We are discussing fall/autumn, and he wants to tell me about a time he fell down. I need to clarify what I mean by "fall" in this context.*
- *When I asked him why he thought the spider made that web, he said, "Cuz he wants to fly really fast." Maybe he's thinking about Spider Man? I need to ask him what he's thinking of and why he said that. I could give him more information about arachnids vs. superheroes.*

Helpful Resources

With practice, we can become more intentional, and there are approaches out there that can help us along the way. For example, video is a powerful tool for helping teachers become more mindful of—and intentional about—their interactions with children. [Teachstone professional development](#) centers on the power of video observations to build this intentionality.

Effective Teachers in Action



Take a look at our extensive collection of classroom videos in the CLASS Video Library. You can view effective interactions in everyday classroom situations, learn why some interactions are more effective than others, and practice observing and categorizing interactions.

[Explore the CLASS Video Library](#)