

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Establishing Routines and Relationships

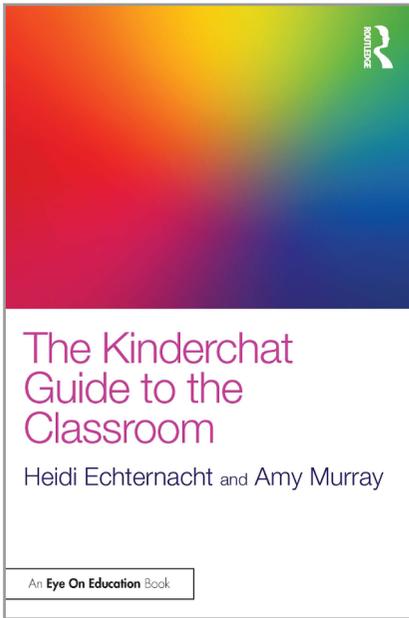
from *The Kinderchat Guide to the Classroom*



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1. Establishing Routines and Relationships

By Heidi Echternacht and Amy Murray

from The Kinderchat Guide to the Classroom

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Red: Establishing Routines and Relationships

Too many teachers rush into curriculum before they've worked with their class to establish relationships and routines. No, we don't mean to write the "agreed-upon rules" or "good ideas of school" on a large piece of paper that everyone signs and no one looks at again. We mean doing the hard, exhausting work at the core of teaching far too many overlook. Your first full SIX WEEKS of "lesson planning" should be solely focused on establishing routines and relationships with your class. The hard work you do here will pay off in big dividends down the road. In this chapter, we show you how to slow down and make key investments in your class culture.

Routines: The First Six Weeks of Teaching

You will work harder in the first six weeks of kindergarten than you will all year long. Breathe that one in. Every ounce of work that you put into scaffolding structures and routines and building rapport with your class WILL PAY OFF. The key is to slow down, take your time, and acknowledge that *this is time well spent*.

- ◆ If you only do one thing for the first six weeks, it should be to actively build and facilitate relationships with and among your class.
- ◆ Your second goal is helping kids be independent in following school and class routines.
- ◆ Keep reminding yourself that **this is the general entire scope of your curriculum for A FULL SIX WEEKS**. Get to know your students and help them know each other and help them build independence in the classroom. That's it.

The First Day

To a little kid, whatever new grade they're entering, is like a baseball player's first time in the major leagues. This is doubly so for kindergarden. **THEY ARE ABSOLUTELY, TOTALLY, AND COMPLETELY *STAR * STRUCK***. This is it, the big time, and they've hit it. They've been up and dressed since 5 a.m. They've dreamed of this moment every night over the summer and **IT'S FINALLY HERE**. It's all so exciting, it's possible they will literally *lose it at any moment*. To them, this is Disneyworld, Harry Potter Hogwarts, their birthday, and New Year's Eve all in one. This is kindergarden, baby. It's pure, raw, joy, and emotion, and you, the **TEACHER**, are the official ringleader.

If the first six weeks are tough, the first day of kindergarden is the toughest in many respects. If school starts at 8 a.m., be prepared to be *utterly exhausted* by 9:15. For this reason, keep the first day simple. Plan **ONE THING** and then cut it in half. The trick to the first day is surviving your first two hours. After that, you are primarily teaching the routine and holding everyone together until the end of the day.

Let's get clear here: we are going to tell you straight up that anyone pretending there's not a degree of desperation and complete and utter exhaustion in the first few days of teaching kindergarden for even the most experienced, kind, and capable teacher, is 100 percent lying to you via omission or inexperience. You will sweat, but you **WILL GET THROUGH IT**. Why desperation and exhaustion? Here's the first five minutes of the first day of kindergarden:

- ♦ José is crying.
- ♦ José's mom is crying.
- ♦ Petunia's grandma is picking her up at the car line early.
- ♦ Cara is going on the bus Tuesdays and Wednesdays, but not this week.
- ♦ Georg jumps into the room, trips, and starts crying.
- ♦ Sara knows Lola from camp and they are already BEST FRIENDS.
- ♦ Did you get Paola's allergy medicine? No tree nuts or dairy.
- ♦ Paula's allergic to peanuts and it's her birthday next week. Can she bring in cupcakes?
- ♦ Grace's mom would like to meet.
- ♦ Liam keeps touching the center you JUST SET UP.
- ♦ Jasmine HAS TO wear her glasses, which she hates. They're in her backpack. She thinks.
- ♦ Marcus can't find his cubby and is already eating his lunch.
- ♦ Marcus's mom wants to know if he needs sneakers today.
- ♦ The administrative assistant wants to know how many kids are buying lunch today and for you to have your attendance done by 7:55 a.m.

Meanwhile, YOU BARELY KNOW WHO IS WHO YET. And who the heck put Paula and Paola in the SAME CLASS?

Deal with the onslaught and chaos as gracefully as you can—it's important to be grounded and confident as you move around the room. **Everyone appreciates a teacher with a firm but loving hand** on the first day. You'll be sweating for sure, but *it's important you don't look flustered in the least*. It is all your pleasure, and everything is under control. YOU WILL BE OK. Just keep going!

- ♦ Take the time to greet every child (with eye contact and a genuinely warm greeting, of course!).
- ♦ Engage with parents. After a while, if you're having difficulty getting parents out of the room, get the class seated and start reading a book. Give a gentle= but firm, "Goodbye, parents! We will see you later today! We can't

wait to tell you all about it!" Let them lurk if they must, but you keep your focus completely on the kids. They are in your care now and you've got to firmly establish the classroom space and work on building rapport.

- ◆ A story works well to make the break from tearful parents or kids as it usually engages the children and everyone sort of knows the behaviors of "listening to a story," at least for the first few minutes of the first day. Keep the story short. There's a ton of "first day"-type books. Have a collection handy so you can read them throughout the first few days when you're desperate.

After your five-minute story, they will start wiggling. They've been so good. Did you notice? Say so! Brag them up! **Remember, they were working really hard during those first five minutes** because they are dying to engage! Did you know Petunia got a new backpack? Liam got NEW shoes! And José stopped crying, but now Sara wants to sit next to Cara and Lola's upset. Time to move.

The Importance of Props and Keeping It Moving

Jump up, hold hands, and sing a robust "Good Morning!" song. Sit back down. Get out your handy-dandy shiny object: a puppet, a literal shiny object, a rock, whatever it is, don't be proud, and talk to it. Oh yes, talk to it. They'll think you're a loony tune, but they'll be magically transfixed. Go with it.

Introduce yourself to the puppet, rock, whatever it is. A puppet is a bit more personal, but almost any interesting prop can work in a pinch. "Hi, Beavie the Beaver! My name is Ms. (Your Name)! I'm so glad to see you today!" You might even mention that Beavie is a bit shy to meet the new class and he's afraid he won't have any friends. Ask the kids if they'll be Beavie's friend and watch 'em melt.

Beavie's going to do a lot of work for you over the course of the year. Don't be too proud to bust out a puppet friend. You can project every insecurity you sense in the room onto this puppet friend. Model introducing yourself to Beavie with your name and favorite color, animal, whatever, and keep it moving around the circle until everyone has had a turn to share.

The prop often helps the quiet child open up, and if they don't want to contribute, you just say, "Marcus, would you tell Rocky the Rock your name later?" He'll nod thankfully. Always help a child save face. Give them extra time to gather their thoughts as it can often take them a bit longer to respond, but always be ready to rescue them quickly and gracefully.

Inevitably, someone will say, "I'm five!" and shock waves will roll through the crowd, "I'm five TOO!" Did you know they were five or six years old? They are! Get them back up moving with another game like "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" or whatever's in your arsenal. (We list a bunch at the end of this chapter!) Phew. You made it through the first 15 minutes! Time to visit the bathroom! It's new and different TOO! Get your play partner and let's go check it out!

Transition Times and Facilitating Relationships

- ♦ One helpful transitional routine to get students in the habit of, is to integrate frequent group bathroom breaks, water fountain, and cubby/backpack visits so all of your transition time is grouped together. This way you minimize interruptions during class time for bathroom and water breaks. Have students do their "three things" before going to recess, after recess, before and after lunch. Anytime there's a transition, give them some time and space to "take care of business."
- ♦ For the first few weeks of school, you can spend 15–20-minute intervals doing "three things" and you absolutely SHOULD! AT EVERY TRANSITION. By November, it will all be old hat, and while still interesting, they'll have a little dirt under their chin by then.

"Three Things":

1. Visit their cubby (very important for the first month of school, especially as kids need to spend A LOT of time talking about their backpack, lunchbox, or even just sitting and chatting in the cubby). Giving them TIME

to do this is not only soothing but also helps build community.

2. Use the bathroom. (Opportunity is knocking!)
3. Get drinks from the water fountain. (Yes, it's that exciting.)

Play Partners:

- ♦ Play partners help ensure that every child has the opportunity for some one-to-one time with each of their other classmates. You can be as strict or as loose about them as you need, but the general idea is that each child is assigned one classmate to line up with when you go places or they need a partner for something. Switch the partners up each day. You will quickly find it's the first thing they ask or remind you to do in the morning and a great talking point for parents and their children, "Who was your play partner today?"
- ♦ For a quick first day "activity," have play partners show each other their cubbies, backpacks, lunch bags, shoes, whatever they've got. If you're in a school where even one child might not have supplies, be sure to hand out a "school thing" so everyone can put something in their cubby and show it off and connect. It can be as simple a thing as a rock or pebble from your personal collection. It's not about the "things" as much as it is establishing the kids have THEIR OWN special place for THEIR things.

A Schedule for Security

For your first day, pretty much the only agenda you have is to make sure every kid has a good time. By this point in the day, the kids have been at school for 30–45 minutes. Believe it or not, they are starting to tap out. When is it time for lunch? When do we get to go home? Oh yes, we know it's 9:15 a.m. The schedule is critical to share that first day to help ease anxiety. We ALL like to know what's next and when "it" ends. Kids are no different. For the first day, keep it simple and try to chunk it all into five things. Use each finger on your hand to give them a visual. That way you can quickly switch to a nonverbal cue when Joey asks

you for the bazillionth time when is it time to go home. Modify the following example as your schedule calls for:

- ♦ Thumb: “Good Morning” (all routines)
- ♦ Pointer: activity or going to visit places
- ♦ Tall man: lunch
- ♦ Ring finger: rest, activity, or going to visit places
- ♦ Pinky: play and snack
- ♦ Then it’s time to wave goodbye:)

Save your *ONE VERY SIMPLE* planned activity for somewhere in the middle of your day. Any activity you plan should be a maximum of about 10–15 minutes. Honestly, the kids just really want to look at their lunchboxes, shoes, and look around at things and each other. Everything is new and shiny. Take the time to look around at things as a group. Spend the first day taking a walk to some of the places around the school they will need to go to, and greeting a few of the people they will see in the school. Practice doing “three things” and playing “getting to know you,” simple nursery school-style songs, and clap games. Keep it moving!

In the afternoon, get outside and play. Like for all afternoon. This is how humans get to know one another, and children need LOTS of unstructured time to do that work. Make sure to have an extra afternoon snack and a rest time. Remember they’ve been up and PUMPED UP since 5 a.m. and they are pretty much toast after 11 a.m. that first day. A good rule of thumb for kindergarten is to plan for half days of an “academic” program and long afternoons of unstructured play.

Giving children the space to play and move, earns and builds trust between the teacher and the students. They are learning that they can depend on you to give them what they need.

A Note on Class Jobs

Jobs always feel very important at the beginning of the year and then seem to erode as the busyness of the year progresses. There

are usually a few key jobs that are actually necessary to the class functioning, others that are highly sought after, and the rest are fluff. Some teachers incorporate jobs seamlessly into their day with great success. Class jobs can be a great way for children to take responsibility, feel ownership within the classroom, and help insure a daily routine. However, know that maintaining the daily routine of a job for everyone can get to be more of a headache than a help. It's OK to assign a daily job for the child who needs it and to let the rest fall to volunteering or being assigned as needs arise.

The First Week

Day two is a bit of a hangover for everyone, and the rest of the week is usually a complete blur. Everyone is coping with new sleep schedules and morning routines, still trying to find their way to school and back. Remember, *your primary goal is to get to know your class and to help them get to know each other.* For "math" and "reading," play whole-class games like "Jack Be Nimble" or "Punchanella," and incorporate "Ride and Read" as outlined in the Orange chapter into your routine. Get outside as much as you can. You don't need to do any formal academics the first week; rather, you need to observe and engage with your class and get them interacting with each other – that's it. If you are required to start formal academics right away, be sure to hand them a copy of this guidebook and work to incorporate these techniques as best you can.

By the end of the first week, your goal is to have taken your class through an entire week's schedule, slowly building in pieces of the routine day by day. The trick to teaching routines is to scaffold them in SLOWLY so that they help build both independence and confidence in your students to the point where, after six weeks of actual blood, sweat, and tears, you rarely, if ever, have to mention routines again. It becomes an invisible machine that *JUST WORKS*. In truth, so many teachers do this invisible work so well that most people have absolutely no idea how hard it is to do!

*Keep in mind, this work requires that you think through step-by-step how you are going to do *EVERY* THING*, which is again why we recommend not bothering with any “academic” work – this IS the academic work, helping children learn to self-regulate through their school day. Slow it all WAAAAAY DOWN.*

Even something as simple as having your class draw a picture requires thinking ahead:

- ♦ How will they choose their work space?
- ♦ What kind of paper will you use?
- ♦ Are you going to use this drawing in a portfolio?
- ♦ Do you have enough crayons for every table or child?
- ♦ What clean-up routines will you be reinforcing after they are finished working?
- ♦ What will the child who is finished in literally one minute do next?

Every routine or group behavior you want to encourage, brag up big time. “Oh, now look how nicely these two play partners lined up together, they knew just where to go!” Water fountain procedures: the child behind counts “3-2-1, NEXT” chant style, and, yes, they can get back in line. You are MAKING the time and creating the space. You will know you are on a roll when a new “routine song” spontaneously emerges from the collective. “Three things, line up at the gray wall” can turn into a kindergarten hip-hop favorite in no time.

Your ultimate aim is to establish a “community of kids” who have voice and choice in their classroom. The expectations you set help determine that culture. It’s like its own mini society in some respects. To get it off the ground, keep things predictable but not rigid. The connection between the kids and you is more important than any routine. If you ever have to choose one, always choose fostering relationships over routines. By the end of the first week, every kid in your class should be feeling, “Oh yeah, I got this.”

The First Month

It won’t take long for challenging behaviors to emerge. One of the most endearing things about kindergartners is their transparency.

You will not need to guess how anyone is feeling or reacting! Part of the reason for taking so much time to establish your classroom routines is that it gives your kids a solid, predictable base of expectations from which they can operate.

By the end of the first month, hopefully they have tested you a bit. Any class worth their salt is going to test you a bit. Teaching and learning is a two-way street! While you are getting to know them, they are also checking YOU out! Oh yes, they are sly, but be assured your new little darlings are watching you LIKE A HAWK.

- ♦ Are you 100 percent consistent? Are you dependable?
- ♦ Are you sarcastic or terse when you talk to children, or are you genuine and kind?
- ♦ Do you listen to kids? Allow them to talk? Value their input?
- ♦ When you made a mistake, did you hide it? Own up to it? Model what to do?
- ♦ Have you built a relationship with EVERY CHILD?
- ♦ What essential routines have you dropped reinforcing?
- ♦ Can they depend on you to sense when they need to move?
- ♦ What did you do when someone told you “no” or pretended to not hear the direction?
- ♦ Might you be showing any favoritism? Where?
- ♦ Do you praise the way a child physically looks? (Don’t!)
- ♦ How do you speak with your colleagues? Friendly? Or tense?
- ♦ Are you having fun, or are you projecting your frustration?
- ♦ When somebody did something “wrong,” how did you react and what were the consequences?
- ♦ Are you fair?
- ♦ Are you trustworthy?
- ♦ Can they tell the difference between when you are serious about something and when you aren’t?

By the end of the first month, you should be well on your way to communicating expectations to your class completely

nonverbally. You've done the verbal praise, you've been consistent, and they should know the basics by now. A raised eyebrow or hand signal should go a long way. They like and look up to you, they trust you, and everyone wants to move forward to the next thing because *you've proved to them that it's way more fun to see what's next than to entertain themselves with poor behavior.*

That said, there are always years and kids that are particularly challenging, and we've all been there. Refer to the Blue chapter for more specifics on dealing with classroom management and behavior.

You will know what kind of year you're going to have the first time they help clean up the classroom. Do they work for the common good, or are they too busy with their own agenda or unaware of the team? If it's the latter, you're in for a long year.

— Linda Rutherford, first-grade teacher, California

By the end of the first month you should have:

- ♦ established a rapport with every child in your class.
- ♦ communicated positively at least once with every parent.
- ♦ established daily routines and a predictable schedule.
- ♦ made sure every child is aware of routines and working toward independence.
- ♦ a class that is beginning to function as a unit or team.
- ♦ made observations about each child and have some basic goals outlined.
- ♦ made sure every child has had individual time to play with every other child. (You'd be surprised at how many kids still don't know the name of their classmates even a month into school!)
- ♦ begun basic scaffolded reading and math activities as outlined in the Orange chapter.

Congratulations, You Made It!

The first six weeks of school are so tough because kids are testing you and you need to remain consistent in each and every interaction. Anyone who says that's easy, hasn't done it enough!

Being consistent is one of the most difficult aspects of teaching. Note there is a vast space between consistency and rigidity.

It seems like consistency would be the easy part, but reach back into your EdPsych classes and realize that you are actively shaping behavior. If you don't have your group in reasonable shape by this point, IT'S YOU, NOT THEM. That doesn't mean you don't have issues or problems with a particular child; rather, it means that by this point, you have your class humming along and working as a unit.

Young children expect and depend on routines and will hold you to them. Every teacher is familiar with the scenario where kids come into the classroom and within two seconds they have already asked, "Did you change the jobs yet?" Being consistent doesn't mean you never forget to change the jobs; instead, being consistent means they can depend on you to maintain the overall structure and include them when things change.

Rigid expectations, on the other hand, can damage your class, not only in fostering a class culture of "gotcha!", policing, and tattling, but ultimately the issue is that type of atmosphere results in children not building independence, self-regulation, and self-direction. Consistency fosters independence, while rigidity fosters compliance. By the end of the first six weeks, your class should feel like a joyful, safe, and happy place where everyone knows what to do.

Basics of Interacting With Young Children

- ♦ Little kids think THE TEACHER is all-seeing, all-knowing. Always remember, to them you hold massive amounts of power. Use and wield it wisely.
- ♦ ALWAYS help kids save face. They say they have read *Harry Potter* and *War and Peace* because they want to seem impressive and smart. Don't take that away from them.
- ♦ They want to feel and be safe, well liked, and to play, explore, and learn.
- ♦ They remember almost everything and yet can't remember anything. Keep multistep directions short and to the point.

- ◆ Sing as much as you possibly can. Music is magic.
- ◆ Puppets will do a lot of work for you. The kids “know” they aren’t real, but are having waaaaaaay too much fun entertaining the fantasy, so don’t spoil it for them.
- ◆ Kids can tackle big topics with astounding insight and will impress you with their kindness and generosity. They will also fight over who is sitting closer to the crayon basket.

The Importance of Observing

Whether you are highly experienced or just starting your journey working with children, observing kids at play and work is one of the most important things you can do as an educator. In addition to watching children in school settings, it is a key educational experience for teachers to observe children at play. Whether it be through babysitting, after school, or camp experience, observing a wide variety of children’s developmental norms and processes is a powerful and necessary tool for any educator.

At the beginning of any year, observing children in your class should take anywhere from 30 percent to 50 percent of your attention. That may feel like a lot! When teaching young children, you will constantly feel pulled in 1,000 different directions at once. We guarantee you will never “get to it”—observation is something *you must prioritize*. Just put down the scissors, planbook, or conversation with a colleague and get to it. Recess and playground time is prime time to schedule into your day. Even then, it can be a challenge to ground yourself enough to stay still and live in the moment. Be aware that is where the children are living – in the moment. Observe that, marvel in it, and absorb the energy around you. After a while, begin to zero in on who is doing what, where, when, why, and how.

Your observations are a free and readily accessible assessment tool that is often underused in the classroom setting. Watching how children interact with one another both

informs your practice and helps you learn more about each individual child. Observation helps you put your lessons in perspective. You worked three hours creating the perfect lesson and delivered it with razor-sharp perfection? They've already forgotten it and are now into crafting the perfect dandelion soup. Not that your lesson didn't matter or that they didn't learn, it's just that their SERIOUSNESS is right there – in that SECOND or MINUTE. It's that fast. And luckily, kids are forgiving of our best efforts.

Setting Up Class Rules and Management: Dos and Don'ts

We talk more specifically about classroom management, “rules” and behaviors in the Blue chapter. Please be sure to flip to that section and review, as classroom management and behavior is an ongoing, never-ending process. In the meantime, here are a few guidelines to get you going:

Relationships

The most fun thing about teaching should be the relationships you build with your students. And to be honest, it's harder work to do with some than others. It's your JOB to love each one of these kids, and if you can't muster outright love, you've got to at the very least achieve genuine appreciation. Usually, it's not the kids that are difficult to love; rather, it's a difficult parent or extenuating circumstance that can have you digging deep. Luckily, this is usually the exception. Kids and families, for the most part, are eager to learn, do well, and have fun.

Building Rapport Quickly

Learn their names, spell them right, pronounce them right, and USE THEM. Make sure to check with parents and kids about how they'd like their name pronounced. It can be difficult in passing to hear, focus, and get it all correct on a very busy first day, and it's extremely important that you get it right. This can be easier said than done as it can be a little awkward asking a parent to say the name again until you say it correctly, but stick with it

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk together about how rules help keep us safe. • Keep focused on achievable, age-appropriate, positive actions. • Spend a lot of time observing your class in unstructured play. • Spend group time exchanging in dialogue with your class. Suspend your desire for an outcome or result, and just enjoy talking with them on any topic as if you are playing ball with them. Have frequent whole-group back and forth conversations. • Have a plan beforehand on how you are going to have them go places. Do they line up? Where? Try to keep it in the same place. • Have a plan on how the students will move throughout the classroom. Realize that will ebb and flow as needs arise. • Keep materials sparse and purposeful and add as needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have more than 3 “rules.” • Focus on the negative: “don’t run in the hall, don’t lick the floor.” • Do any kind of big project before you’ve spent a lot of time observing children at play. This will help you spot potential pitfalls to your plans. • Waste time by making a long list of agreements, signing names to it, and then never using it again. Better to have no written rules than to create a useless document. Refer to the Blue chapter for specific guidance on how to create a class charter. • Treat transitions as afterthoughts. Your “curriculum” for the first six weeks IS transitions. They are transitioning to school! • Don’t be surprised when children use the room in unintended ways. Stay willing and open to accepting their ideas. It’s their room after all! • Don’t overwhelm children with choices.

FIGURE 1.1

“Dos and don’ts” of establishing classroom routines

and have them e-mail you a pronunciation if you need to. Honor a child and family by showing that you are paying attention to what their child wants to be called in school.

Confession: Every year in the first few minutes of the first day of school – even after 20 years of teaching I think, “how on earth am I going to remember everyone’s name?” I am terrible

at remembering names, and oh help me when I have siblings I've had before. I've even misremembered kids' names as their mom's name. Yet somehow, I eventually remember and you will too. It helps writing them down a billion times while you're making your beginning-of-the-year lists and using their names frequently.

Heidi

Pro tip: NEVER make all your name tags, cubby tags, birthday charts, and so on without parents first confirming their child's name and information. *Every year it seems there are one or two spelling corrections to names. Start small with one name tag and have parents check the spelling, and THEN make all your cubby and name tags. It'll save you a lot of redoing.*

Nonverbal Communication Speaks Loudly

During the “great digital pivot” in the pandemic of 2020, everyone got a crash course on how important facial expressions are in engaging children. Teachers’ facial muscles were sore from full-day workouts of overexaggerated expressions as we worked to engage children through computers! While digital engagement may require more extremes in this area, “in person” you’d be really surprised at how many people don’t do this! Your facial expressions should be doing A LOT of work when you are around young children (and old people, too, for that matter!). Raise your eyebrows and say hello without actually saying ANYTHING! Look genuinely happy and interested to see people instead of the nonexpressive blasé face we often fade into in life. Nonverbal communication is so powerful and underused. Use it everywhere you go! Spread joy to old people on the street with a raised eyebrow and warm greeting. It’s so worth it to see people’s faces just absolutely light up.

I once had several lively and hours-long extensive conversations over a two-week period with a young child who only spoke Estonian and I only spoke English. The only word we repeated back and forth was “hello” and “keeshu-meow.” We became

good friends through literally hours and hours of sustained nonverbal conversation. We gave goodbye presents to one another. I found a whistle in a tourist shop and, without words, he gifted me a prized stick from his collection.

– Heidi

Facilitating Relationships Child-to-Child

One of the best ways to get to know the children is to help them get to know each other. That’s what they are all there to do – make a friend. And they are each worried they won’t have one.

Play Partner

Assigning daily partners for each child to play with can be such a comfort to the worried child. For the first few weeks of school, having play partners ask each other various questions and share together can help open up conversations and spark new friendships.

Show-and-Tell

There are teachers out there who love show-and-tell, but honestly, after a while it can get to be kind of a drag. However, KIDS ABSOLUTELY LOVE AND ADORE SHOW-AND-TELL. They want to talk to each other and show things to each other and ultimately PLAY WITH THOSE THINGS with each other. Don’t be too proud to let show-and-tell shine. Switching it up from a whole-group activity to a partner share can help.

Activities and Games to Play as a Class

Some of our favorite games:

Oh yes, any game you play, you absolutely MUST do it 20 times over to make sure every child gets a turn. You’ll hear it in your sleep, but that comes with the territory.

- ◆ Jack Be Nimble: Super easy, first-day stuff here. Use literally anything about the size of a candle and chant each child’s name: “Cara Be Nimble, Cara Be Quick, Cara jump over the candlestick,” and they jump over. This

helps kids learn each other's names, and you can watch them puff up as they make the jump over the "candle."

- ◆ Punchinello: All the kids sing, "What can you do, Punchinello, funny fellow?" One child leads a trick in the center of the circle and all the kids sing back "We can do it too, Punchinello, funny fellow!" while they try it too. Good stuff.
- ◆ Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes: A classic
- ◆ Variations of Stop and Go: Use nonverbal cues to indicate when they "freeze" or start to move again. As we discuss in the Orange chapter on curriculum, try it with symbols and road signs. Add in and use music to indicate the stop/start signals. At the "stop" portions, have them find their play partner and share a story or something about themselves, and then start the music again.
- ◆ Skip to My Lou: This can get a bit rowdy but it's a ton of fun! Especially with play partners. You can also mix up a pair and share with "Skip to My Lou" to keep it fun. When the song stops, pair and share! *This can also help you teach the procedure of what to do when you don't have a partner.*
- ◆ Circle dances: You can start with a basic "Ring Around the Rosie" to form the basis for multiple line, step, or square dances. Begin with the classic game and then vary using different songs and rhythms, utilizing clapping, differing steps, and motions. Try making both big and smaller circles. Moving together in various ways within a circle is powerful!

We urge you to play these games and other whole-group nursery rhyme types of games and to actively work to find new games to add to your repertoire. Sadly, many of these "old-fashioned" clap and movement games are disappearing from early childhood classrooms in favor of more academic activities. We can't stress enough how important these games are, not only to help you build community among children, but also because research supports that these types of games are very effective at helping children develop self-regulation skills – and that is ultimately what you are primarily doing as a teacher of young children. For

more specifics on self-regulation and circle games, refer to the Yellow chapter on “Child Development.”

Sources of movement, chant, call and response, and song games:

- ◆ *Raffi, Pete Seeger, Wee Sing, Ella Jenkins (a favorite!), Swingset Mamas, Red Grammer, and Ziggy Marley are a few classic places to start exploring. The world of children’s music is huge! Look for new emerging artists!*
- ◆ *The Smithsonian Folkways website has a wonderful searchable database for wide varieties of culturally important children’s songs from all over the world. Be sure to check it out!*

Interacting with Caregivers and Parents

Let’s not kid around. This is the hardest part of the job of working with young children. Know that this aspect of the job gets MUCH easier as you gain more confidence and experience. It can be very intimidating talking to parents about their children when you are still new to the profession. Even seasoned teachers will say it’s their least favorite part of the job!

For the most part, parents are your biggest supporters. It’s really important that you view your role as being in actual partnership with parents versus seeing yourself as the provider of “parent education.” That’s a mistake we see even veteran teachers often make. It’s an important distinction and perspective to adopt. While you, as a teacher, do have specialized knowledge of child development and curriculum, they have specialized knowledge of their child. *The parent-teacher relationship should always be one of exchange versus hierarchy.*

Your job is to meet each child and family where they are and to help them move forward in whatever way you can assist. For some families, that means helping parents see that little Marcus really CAN do it himself! For others, it means helping families get the support they need to ensure their child’s safety and nutrition. Ultimately, you are there for *that child*. Think about what a really wonderful gift that is to busy families trying to juggle it all and worried if they are doing it right.

Parents are generally either super eager or semi-terrified about what you have to say about little Joey. Is he alright? Does he cry too much? He read *Harry Potter*, can you see he's clearly a genius? Does he have any friends? His older brother picks on him – is it affecting his work? Remember, parents are entrusting you with their heart each morning they send their child to you. Be gentle with them.

However, nothing can ruin a day like a difficult parent interaction. Here are our best tips for ensuring that you keep your interactions as positive as possible:

First Meeting

Be sure to smile and greet families warmly when you first meet them. Reach out and introduce yourself. Don't be shy! You are a professional! It gives everyone confidence when you have confidence! Keep your interaction light and short, and try to meet and greet every single family.

Back-to-School Night/Meet the Teacher

Every teacher dreads this night. Maybe there's one teacher out there in the universe who doesn't – if there is, we would love to hear from them! It's the one night you are stage front in the spotlight talking to a room full of adults who are all LOOKING YOU OVER. (No pressure!)

- ◆ Present yourself confidently and professionally.
- ◆ Overprepare!
- ◆ Tell them a little bit about yourself.
- ◆ Pause regularly throughout your presentation to take a nice long deep breath. You are likely speaking twice as fast as they are processing.
- ◆ If they laugh at your bad jokes, know you are in for a good year. If you get radio silence, smile and just keep going. It will be over before you know it!
- ◆ They **are** interested in curriculum, but they also know their kid is interested in their birthday and nervous about buying lunch. They know what's important to their child. Be sure you show them that you do too!

- ♦ If you don't know something, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, I'll find out and get back to you!"
- ♦ Follow up via e-mail by sending out your entire presentation to everyone so that families that couldn't attend are included and can access the information without feeling awkward about asking.

One thing I've started doing at Back-to-School night is starting with the adults sharing out their memories of themselves in that grade. It helps to put things in perspective a bit. Kids don't remember the math curriculum, but as adults they can still remember how they felt thirty years ago when they felt picked on or excited about being chosen to erase the whiteboards.

Heidi

Conferences

Parent-teacher conferences may be the thing you dread but actually end up liking. You learn a lot about your families, which helps you get to know your students better. Getting to know a fuller picture of your students' family life and situation teaches you tons about each child.

Some schools even do home visits at the start of the year to help kids get acquainted with teachers. Having positive relationships with children's families and caregivers is as important as having positive relationships with the child. It's not always easy, but you definitely get better at it with practice.

Tips for Conferences:

- ♦ Overprepare as much as you can.
 - ♦ Have multiple work samples to share and discuss.
 - ♦ Be prepared to talk about academics, social skills, approach to work, and independence in school routines. Ideally, have anecdotes to share in each category.
- ♦ Be friendly, polite, and professional (which should go without saying by this point!).

- ♦ Let caregivers talk first – ask them what their child is talking about, what they say they like about school.
- ♦ Take notes when needed; often they are reminders to yourself to do something sparked by the conversation.
- ♦ Thank caregivers or parents for sharing and coming, and let them know you are there to help them and their child.
- ♦ Some will go more smoothly than others. Be prepared to be surprised!
- ♦ Have some music playing very softly in the background – it fills an awkward silence and can make you less nervous!
- ♦ If you have multiple conferences back-to-back over the course of an evening (or multiple evenings), have a system to keep things on schedule. The simplest is to have a polite note on your door, asking parents to knock when it is their time.
- ♦ Try to follow up with a note or e-mail thanking parents and reiterating any key points you discussed.

Earning Trust

It takes a while to earn trust among your new colleagues and families and establish yourself as part of the school community. And it should! Teaching is a very personal yet public relationship. Are you the teacher who is absent a lot? Out in public speaking poorly and loudly about your school or families? Teachers are entrusted with holding large parts of the community's privacy. Are you up to that challenge?

Tips for Earning Trust:

- ♦ Be predictable.
- ♦ Be fair.
- ♦ Be honest and transparent.
- ♦ Ask questions of colleagues before enacting new initiatives or major changes that may affect other teachers or classes.
- ♦ Communicate regularly (weekly newsletters, regular written or phone check-ins, and reply to e-mails promptly).

- ♦ Never share information about other students with another parent.
- ♦ Make sure your classroom, content, and curriculum represent all students and are diverse and equitable.
- ♦ Communicate any problems or issues quickly – don't wait, get ahead of it

Establishing Credibility When You Are New

There is usually a BUZZ in any school community about “the new teacher.” You are getting looked over! There really is no community resource quite like a TEACHER. And now that's YOU! Kids, families, and colleagues are going to want to know all about you and can't wait to get to know you!

In addition to the other advice we've given here, the most critical piece for coming into a new school community is DO NOT TO GET SUCKED INTO SCHOOL GOSSIP with colleagues! Oftentimes the wrong players have been WAITING for new blood to come in so they can get more political players on “their side.” Before you know the full picture of what's going on, you might find yourself aligned with what you eventually learn was the wrong end of town. It's important that for your first year – even your first few years – you stay focused on your classroom and try to keep the politics of the school community to a minimum. Work to build a diversity of relationships throughout your new school. You don't have to be a social butterfly, but you need to establish yourself as a professional.

The Formalities of School

Kindergarten has the special circumstance that it can be the *very first time* a family enters a formally structured school situation. They may have previously been in a drop-in day-care situation or a more casual home care arrangement. Many school routines are foreign to parents and caregivers. “School begins promptly at 8 a.m., with arrival times between 7:45 a.m. and 7:55 a.m., pick up is from 3:05 p.m.–3:30 p.m.” might all be a new language to Harriet's parents who usually get her dressed around 10 a.m.

- ♦ Be patient – remember this is ALL NEW.
- ♦ Focus on one routine at a time.
- ♦ Use school resources such as nurses, counselors, and administrators to help you reinforce if needed.

Dealing with a Difficult Parent

Any server in any restaurant can tell you that sometimes people are just unreasonable. Well, those customers have kids and eventually one WILL end up in your class! Here's a few tips on dealing with very difficult parents:

- ♦ Be professional.
- ♦ Listen more than you talk.
- ♦ Repeat back "I hear you saying..., do I have this correct?"
- ♦ Communicate in writing so you have a record of your interactions.
- ♦ Be transparent, honest, and apologize and admit mistakes or misunderstandings.
- ♦ **Always** wait 24–36 hours to reply to an angry or tense e-mail. Give yourself some space and time to reply calmly and professionally.
- ♦ Recognize that ultimately it's not about you; it's about their life situation and/or their child. Do what you can and know the year will end! (We've ALL been there!)
- ♦ Ask for help from a guidance counselor, colleague, or administrator.
- ♦ Don't ever put yourself in a room alone with a hostile or angry parent.

Managing Expectations and Establishing Boundaries

Teaching is the kind of profession where you could work 24 hours every day and still feel like you're running behind. Between your colleagues, families, students, and administrators, you are always serving somebody! To stay centered in yourself, it helps to make lists and prioritize tasks. This is another reason why it is important to start your year off slowly and methodically so that you aren't frantically trying to deliver content and academics before the hard work of establishing and managing all of these

relationships is solidified. Keep chipping away at it all bit by bit and it WILL all fall into place! We share our best tips and advice on this in the Violet chapter.

Assessment Checklist: Establishing Routines and Relationships

Use this checklist to help guide your thinking about each child in your class. It's not a "pass/fail" or even a "yes/no" checklist that you need to complete, but rather a list of things to think about in terms of how a child is approaching their first six weeks of school. Discuss with your students' caregivers and parents areas they excel at and where they could improve:

- ◆ has the tools and supports needed for success in school
- ◆ is well rested and ready for the day
- ◆ arrives on time to school
- ◆ follows classroom routines and multistep directions
- ◆ completes tasks in a timely manner
- ◆ makes transitions smoothly and respects boundaries
- ◆ cleans up and works as part of the class team
- ◆ plays well with others and makes friends
- ◆ is happy and interested in school
- ◆ resolves conflicts and solves problems appropriately
- ◆ feels secure about their social role within the class

References and Recommended Reading

Smithsonian Institution. (2020). *Smithsonian Folkways Recordings*. <https://folkways.si.edu/search?query=Children%27s>.