Developing Rules and Routines in the Infant Classroom
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1. Introduction

The importance of teaching rules and routines

The aim of this booklet is to provide a brief overview of evidence based strategies to promote positive behaviour and learning in the infant classroom. This resource was developed due to growing requests from Infant class teachers for assistance in supporting students who are struggling to settle into school due to social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties.

In order for young students to successfully transition into school it is necessary that they develop a sense of belonging in their new setting. The Identity and Belonging theme within Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) highlights the importance of forming positive connections with others and the need to provide a safe place for children to develop and nurture links with the community. This is reflected within SPHE in the infant classroom where the aim is to promote a student’s wellbeing by fostering self-confidence and a sense of belonging.

One way to foster a sense of belonging and to support anxiety associated with transitions is to establish clear and consistent rules and routines in the classroom. Clear and consistent rules and routines in any classroom, particularly in the COVID -19 context will support students experiencing anxiety transitioning back to school.

This booklet aims to support teachers to develop strategies to promote positive behaviour and learning at Level 1 of the Continuum of Support Framework, (Classroom Support) for all, for some, and for a few students whilst settling into their new school.
2. Teaching routines

At the start of every school year, there are new rules and routines for students to get to know. Regularly following a clear sequence of events provides structure to a student’s day. A clear set of rules tells them what is and is not allowed in a particular lesson, game or situation.

Students can become confused and anxious if they do not understand the rules and routines in the infant classroom. In some instances, they may respond with behaviours of concern. Breaking down classroom rules and routines into simple steps is a very helpful strategy to support these students.

Providing structure particularly at key times in the day, will help students to recognise over time what is happening, what is coming next, what they need to do and how to do it well. Times of the day requiring structure will vary from class to class and teacher to teacher and may include events such as arriving to class in the morning, getting organised to learn during a lesson or preparing for yard time.

Before you can begin teaching a routine, you first need to plan and think about what routines may occur during the school day.

Routines are made up of a sequence of actions and the easiest way to teach them is to break down the routine into separate steps. This is a strategy referred to as task analysis. To develop a task analysis, first complete the task yourself and write down the steps needed in order to complete it.

For example, a task analysis of hanging up a coat may look like this:

1. pull down zip
2. take off coat
3. find collar of coat
4. hold coat by the collar
5. hang coat by collar on hook

Your task analysis may have additional steps, for example if students have designated hooks, you may need to include a step where they find their own hook. When you have the routine broken into smaller steps you can begin the process of teaching the routine.
To begin teaching routines you will need to:

a. clearly tell your students what they need to do.

b. use visual supports to help them complete a step/s in a sequence of events. For example place a picture of a student over a coat hook.

c. demonstrate or offer physical guidance to help them complete a step or task within a routine.

d. praise your students as they complete the steps.

Most students will learn by repeated practice so it is necessary to ensure that there is adequate time to complete classroom routines that are predictable and consistent.

Keep in mind that some students may not yet have the prerequisite skills to complete certain steps. These students may need routines to be broken down into even smaller steps, given extra guidance in completing them and possibly have some additional supports put in place.

In appendix 1, we have a example of a task analysis for hand-washing. The task analysis also includes additional (visual) supports that some students may require. Appendix 1 also includes ideas for other routines that may occur in your classroom.
3. Teaching rules

It is also important to establish clear rules and expectations for students to follow. Explicitly teaching classroom rules plays a crucial role in their effectiveness.

Classroom rules should be:

a. developed collaboratively with students. This process ensures a shared understanding and encourages a sense of fairness and accountability. This helps students to gain a better understanding of the rules.

b. short and few. It is important that students understand what is expected of them and that the rule clearly states what they need to do e.g., gentle hands is keeping our hands to ourselves.

c. age appropriate. If the rule is beyond the ability of a student then it will not be effective and they may struggle to learn the appropriate skill.

d. positively phrased. This shows your students what they have to do to meet the rule not what they do not do.

f. displayed clearly. An effective way to do this is to use visual supports placed in clear view of your students.

e. acknowledged and rewarded. It is important to praise students as they make genuine efforts to follow classroom rules and routines. Students may also need a simple reward system such as stickers or teacher ticks to encourage them along the way.

Rules can be difficult to remember for junior infants, especially if they have an additional need that may impact impulsivity and language processing. Not only are students expected to remember their own classroom rules but there may also be school wide rules, yard rules, rules for going to the library and so on.

Developing classroom rules which reflect school-wide expectations can be an effective way in helping to ensure there is more consistency and support for students to learn what is expected within school.
School-wide expectations should be broad enough to apply across all settings and all staff-members should have an understanding of what they look like within each setting.

We teach rules in a similar way to routines.

- Clearly tell your students what you expect.
- Model (for example, doing it yourself or role-playing with other students).
- Support (with visuals).
- Reward regularly.

Initially, just select 1 or 2 rules you want to teach. Set aside extra time to work on these rules. Engineer opportunities for rehearsal with the whole class and reward students for their efforts. It is important to give students time to learn the skills involved in following rules. It will take time, patience and practice for students to follow rules naturally throughout the day. Once your students have learned the initial rules and are following them routinely, build on this by introducing another rule to teach.

Remember, not all students coming into your class will have the capability to generalise rules across settings and may have to be taught each rule in each specific location.

Some students, including those with additional needs may require extra and continued support to follow rules and routines. This support might involve breaking down the sequence of a routine further for a particular student, using visual supports such as a ‘first-next’ board, or using a reward system. For further information please refer to the partner booklet called, ‘Promoting Positive Behaviour and Learning in the Infant Classroom’. 
4. Appendix 1: Example of a handwashing tasks analysis

1. Walk to sink
2. Turn on tap
3. Wet hands with warm water
4. Put soap on hands
5. Rub hands together
6. Rub between fingers
7. Interlock fingers rub palms

Visual prompts for some

go to sink
water on
rinse hands
get soap
rub hands together
rub between fingers
interlock fingers rub palms

Sing "Happy Birthday" or count to 20
8. Rinse soap off hands

9. Turn tap off

10. Dry hands

11. Throw away paper towel
All rules and routines in the infant classroom can be broken down into small steps as per the example above. For some students each step may need to be taught discretely. In a COVID-19 context every classroom will have their own specific rules and routines. Think about all the possible rules and routines you may have to break down into small steps (task analysis) for some students. For example: