Why Can’t You Behave?
The Teacher’s Guide to
Creative Classroom Management, K–3

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This book is dedicated to my mother, Anne Rogovin, who died from brain cancer on July 7, 2003, after a brief and painless illness.

Mom, you have always been and will always be in my heart, in my teaching, in my life. I love you and miss you.
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Acknowledgments

After all the graduate courses taken and the books read, perhaps my greatest learning came from my students. It wasn’t really the “easy” ones, the ones who loved to learn, to participate, to share, and to follow the rules, who were my greatest teachers (though I loved them all the same). Rather, it was those children who were more complicated, the ones who made me lose sleep at night, the ones who forced me to turn to families and colleagues for help. They were the ones I pondered about with my dear friend and colleague, Isabel Beaton, over dinner at Bistango Restaurant on many a Friday evening. I must thank my students.

Children can certainly tell us when we’ve done a great lesson, or when our curriculum doesn’t meet their needs or learning styles. The expression, or lack thereof, on their faces can tell us if they’re with us or lost in thought. Their expressions of joy, their intense involvement in learning and community, inform and energize us. They can teach us a whole lot—if we’re looking and listening. We can learn to do better if we’re willing to be learners and researchers as we teach.

Thank you to the families of my students. You helped me learn the importance of placing family life and culture in the center of my teaching. Your participation within and outside of the classroom has enriched my teaching and my life. The list of those family members with whom I feel so close would fill many pages. Just know that I truly love and appreciate you.

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Having a Consistent Routine and a Schedule Is Absolutely Essential

I want our classroom to be a safe haven from the big world outside. The children should feel safe and comfortable. Whether the children’s world outside of school is rushed, busy, dizzy, scary, peaceful, or stormy, I want the classroom to be calm. I want the children to know basically what to expect, to have a sense of the day ahead. If someone were to ask the children in my class what they do each day at school, they would be able to tell that person about the usual schedule we follow.

Does that mean dull and boring? Absolutely not. Schedules and rituals provide a shape, a structure for the day, not the content. Within the schedule and the rituals, there will be times that are fairly ordinary and times when the class will burst with excitement, where the enthusiasm builds, where you can recite poetry or sing to your heart’s content. But having a consistent routine and a schedule is absolutely essential.

Look at the times in your own life when you have felt particularly frazzled. Often those are times when you’re going through changes, and you don’t know what’s next. I will give the example of my own divorce over nine years ago. That miserable December and the months to follow, my life at home was topsy-turvy. All of the routines and rituals of the past twenty years were suddenly thrown into the air. However, when I entered my classroom, which I called at the time my “salvation,” I suddenly felt calm and peaceful and steady. In fact, looking back at that year when I entered the classroom each morning, I closed the door on my personal life and taught fully, and it turned out to be a great year of teaching, in my opinion. (Many of the families with whom I am still in touch have told me the same.)

How could that be? I knew what to expect. My day (not the content) was already organized for me. We would have Research Workshop and Reading and Writing Workshop, and so on, all the way to Center Time at the end of the day. I knew
that a group of family members would be coming in during Research Workshop a few days a week to work on the Harriet Tubman mural, a mural done with felt on felt. (That mural still hangs in my home.) I knew at Meeting we would recite poetry and sing and have a story—all of which I totally love. I knew that during Writing Workshop it would be calm and relatively quiet and soothing for me, and that it was January of first grade and the writing coming from the children would be marvelous, so we would have lots to celebrate. I knew that at Center Time I might be working on a mural with a group of children, and we’d be chattering away as we painted. I knew that after school I would hang out in the yard and chat with family members, who were unaware at the time of what I was going through. Their friendship was so important to me. I knew that before and after school a group of colleagues at The Manhattan New School would be there for me to listen to me talk or cry—day after day.

All of that predictability gave me a sense of inner peace. I remember saying to my student teachers on those days when I walked into class after things were especially rocky at home, “Watch me today. See how I block my personal problems and try to teach fully. Watch what I do. Learn from me, because there will be difficult times in your life when you will find that your teaching is your salvation.”

Does having routines and rituals mean that dealing with behavior problems, planning, or dealing with possible problems with a family member or an administrator will suddenly become easy? Of course not. But, when you have routines and rituals, at least you don’t have to organize that part of the day, that part of life. That part of the day is taken care of. There’s a rhythm to the day, and that rhythm is soothing to the soul of both teachers and children. Even the families feel a comfort in knowing that their child is in a calm and organized setting.

### Establishing Schedules Should Be a Priority

Some schools hand teachers a schedule. Other schools allow more flexibility. The schedule at my previous school was driven by various pull-out programs, such as ESL, and special push-in reading programs that involved lots of the children. At The Manhattan New School, I create my own schedule, with the exception of the Specials (science, physical education, music, art, and computer science) and a few pull-out programs that involve small numbers of children.

The children are generally more alert and focused in the mornings, so I try to schedule reading and writing in the mornings. (See my other books Classroom Interviews and The Research Workshop for details about the schedule.) Unlike many of my colleagues, I have chosen not to have a morning Meeting. This is just my personal preference. If you are able to make your own schedule, I would suggest that with younger children, you schedule the heavily academic work earlier in the day.
Sometimes the curriculum areas don’t fit neatly into the times you have scheduled or into fifty-minute blocks. How can you possibly stop a truly wonderful Research Workshop in the middle of a profound discussion or a fascinating activity? Sometimes, we don’t. How can you possibly stop an exciting math activity? Sometimes, we don’t. So math may run into Center Time, and Center Time will be only fifteen minutes that day. I rarely cancel Center Time altogether.

When subjects go past the allotted time, I simply say to myself, “Oh well. We’ll make it up.” Or “There was a lot of reading and writing during Research Workshop, so that’s okay that we had less time for the formal reading activity or Writing Workshop.” Because our curriculum is interdisciplinary, it’s actually true that it won’t hurt if one subject runs over the allotted time.

What I am not saying is to dispense with the schedule. The schedule is critical. Keeping approximately to the schedule is essential. The schedule is like the anchor for the ship. The schedule is like a pattern for making a dress. The schedule provides order to the day and the weeks and months. The schedule assures you that you will work to develop skills in all of the curriculum areas.

Does that mean you cannot make exceptions to the schedule? Of course not. You may have a trip planned, school photo day, a special event, a visitor you want the children to meet. You may find that those days when you break from the schedule are particularly exhausting because you are working much harder to maintain order and calm. The pattern of the schedule has a calming effect on the children. The pattern of the schedule and the routines actually empower the children to help run the day.

Sometimes a child starts to cry or look worried when she is uncertain about what will happen after school. She is wondering who will pick her up, where she will be going, or if she is taking the school bus. It can be unnerving to a child when plans for after school are suddenly changed. Early in the year I tell parents to send a note about any changes in their child’s schedule. I collect these notes first thing in the morning so the child will feel secure that I am aware of their after-school plans. When family members forget to notify you, you may have to call their home or work so that a child won’t have to worry all day.

Rituals Are a Vital Part of the Day

When we come back to the room after recess and lunch, the children put their coats in the closet and come to sit at story circle for Meeting. They know to do this because we started this ritual the first day of school. For several weeks, I reminded them to do this before we entered the classroom.

Right away, hands go up. Children want to ask for a special poem we can recite. That’s because our ritual at Meeting is to recite familiar poems and learn new
poems. Then we sing familiar songs and perhaps learn a new song, and then we
have a read aloud and a discussion. Because of this ritual, many children look for-
ward to Meeting. They know what will happen (not the exact content). I know
that some children even lie in bed thinking about and even reciting our poems or
singing our songs. They know they will have a chance to do that again the next
day. Perhaps it is a ritual they will incorporate into their lives.

At Research Workshop, we do the research, and then we share some of what
we have learned. This ritual makes research predictable. Also, my hope is that
children will add the experience of sharing to their lives.

When we line up to go home, we have a ritual for saying good-bye. The chil-
dren take their mail and then line up with their partners. We sing Woody
Guthrie’s song, “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know Yuh.” We say good-bye to
every adult in the room. The adults in turn say good-bye to the children. It may
sound a bit corny, but it gets children in the habit of acknowledging each other.

What Is Our Schedule?

Each morning I write the schedule on a dry mark board. At first, only a few chil-
dren routinely look at the schedule when they come into the room. To get more
children to look at the schedule, I refer to the schedule frequently. After Reading
Workshop, for example, I may ask the children to look to see what is next. I want
them to be in charge of knowing what is happening within their school day. Here
is a typical schedule for our class. The parts that are in bold letters are the ones that
I actually write on the board.

Our Schedule
8:40 A.M. pick up children from the yard or lunchroom (during inclement
weather)
8:55 A.M. Research Workshop
9:30 A.M. Share Time for Research Workshop
9:45 A.M. Reading Workshop
10:30 A.M. Special (Computer Science, Art, Music, Physical Education, or
Science)
11:20 A.M. Writing Workshop
12:10 P.M. Recess and Lunch
1:00 P.M. Meeting (poetry, singing, and a story)
1:30 P.M. Math Workshop
2:00 P.M. Center Time
2:40 P.M. clean up and bus children leave
2:50 P.M. line up for dismissal
Here is the schedule for the days we have interviews, usually once each week:

8:40 A.M. pick up children from the yard
8:55 A.M. begin the interview. The amount of time depends on the level of interest of the children.

between 9:30 and 10:00 A.M. Write a page for the homemade book about the interview.

10:30 A.M. Special (Computer Science, Art, Music, Physical Education, or Science)

11:20 A.M. Reading Workshop

12:10 P.M. Recess and Lunch

1:00 P.M. Meeting (poetry, singing, and a story). If children didn’t have time to finish the page for the homemade book from the morning interview, we have a shorter Meeting.

1:30 P.M. Math Workshop

2:00 P.M. Center Time

An urgent warning: Please don’t put the blocks away! There is an increasing pressure in schools throughout the United States to focus exclusively on reading, writing, and mathematics in preparation for mandated tests. Early childhood teachers have been pressured to cut back or even eliminate Center Time, the time when children can use blocks and Legos, sand and water tables, paint and other arts and crafts materials, and more. They can do high drama in the dress-up area. Center Time is the children’s opportunity to create, explore, develop critical thinking skills, and interact with classmates. It’s an informal way for children to develop language skills and to work on social skills. It enables teachers to make the curriculum interdisciplinary.

Besides all of the educational value in using these materials—it is fun. It brings joy and laughter into the classroom. Many children don’t get to play and use such materials at home in this time of TV, DVDs and videos, and busy schedules. Children love to have fun. They look forward to it. Some of the most difficult behavior problems vanish when children are free to learn using these materials. We must not banish these materials from our classrooms.

Here are a few tips if you are faced with pressure to cut out use of these materials or to eliminate Center Time.

- If you are in a position to speak up, defend your students’ right to use these materials. It’s best to unite with other colleagues in this effort.
- At least integrate the materials into the required content areas—for example, by painting murals about characters from literature or using blocks to make a model from your social studies theme.
WHY CAN’T YOU BEHAVE?

• Work on improving your management skills so that you can carve out time for Center Time. Speed up transitions or time taken for lining up.
• Assess your schedule and rituals to see if there are any activities that can be eliminated.

In Summary

Having rituals and routines helps make the day predictable for students, families, and teachers. They help provide an inner peace so important in our busy world. They provide the framework for a rich curriculum and community building.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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