

No Harmful Words Allowed

*I've finally come to realize that my attitude's infectious
It permeates my classroom, it calms and it protects us
It causes some to wonder what goes on behind my door
And wish that they could teach my kids (not the ones that they abhor)
They watch the transformation as the children walk inside
But don't dare to ask my "secret," for that might scar their pride
My "secret" is quite simple, "harmful words are not allowed!"
I simply find the good in all, and then shout it, shout it loud!"*

Elizabeth Breaux

The Power of Thanks and Praise: Accentuating the Positive

2: Thanks and Praise

Think about how good you feel when someone compliments you on a job well done. It feels good, doesn't it? In fact, thanks and praise are addictive. They are the drugs that keep us yearning for more of the great feelings that they elicit—the more we get, the more we want and need!

It has been proven over and over again that positive people are much more likely to get what they want in life. Positive people are more likely to attain their goals. Positive people attract other positive people because it simply feels good to be around people who spread good feelings. Good things just seem to happen to people who can maintain a positive outlook about their future. But the truth is, not much in this life just happens. We create our destinies through our mind-set and our actions.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the classroom. Positive teachers seem to breed positive students. Students' attitudes and behaviors will eventually mimic those of the teacher—good or bad, positive or negative. If you truly believe this, you will come to affirm that you have the power to make a difference in your classroom through your attitude and behaviors.

Unfortunately, we teachers have become skilled at spotting negatives. We seem to know that they are coming before they arrive. We await them! We have gestures, comments, and consequences ready to spew at a moment's notice. What we often fail to notice or acknowledge is that positive things are occurring in our classrooms at any given time. If we could simply train ourselves to become more astute at spotting the positives (as opposed to spotting the negatives), we could completely turn around the climate of our classrooms. We truly have that power!

Situation



It's the first day of school at Rees Middle School, an inner-city school with a high-poverty student body. Challenges are abundant, the failure rate is high, and teacher morale is low. We will look into the classrooms of two teachers, Mrs. Upbeat and Mrs. Downbeat. Both teach the seventh grade, and both are veteran teachers. Mrs. Upbeat views challenges as a chance to grow. Mrs. Downbeat believes that she has been victimized by her students, administrators, parents, and society, and therefore she has completely relinquished her power.

Again, same school, same students, same grade level...but *different* teacher attitudes and very different results.

What Works



The morning bell rings, and the students "somewhat eagerly" shuffle to their first period classes. (It's the first day of school; therefore, there is some degree of excitement and anticipation.) Mrs. Upbeat waits in her doorway, ready to welcome each student on this important first day.

Because Mrs. Upbeat has learned that positive attitudes breed more positive attitudes, she is ready to begin planting the seeds immediately. The tardy bell rings. Mrs. Upbeat closes the door, faces her students, and says, "My goodness! In all of my years of teaching I have never seen a class walk in so quietly and be seated so promptly! This must be my lucky year! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" What Mrs. Upbeat has just so ingeniously done is to ensure this behavior will be repeated yet again tomorrow. When the students enter the room tomorrow, they will remember the thanks and praise they received the day before, and they will do it again. They have already learned that this is the type of behavior that is expected—and rewarded—in this classroom.

In her many years of teaching, Mrs. Upbeat has learned that there are certain positive behaviors that are ongoing, and in order to keep them ongoing, we must continue to thank, compliment, and praise our students. Too often, we view certain behaviors as expected, and therefore, we don't bother to let students know how much we appreciate them. Mrs. Upbeat knows that she must continue to thank and praise her students for any and all positive behaviors if she wants the behaviors to continue.

On the first day of school, an observer would notice that Mrs. Upbeat thanks and praises her students for such trivial things as

- ◆ Walking into the room quietly
- ◆ Giving her their attention
- ◆ Raising their hands to speak
- ◆ Bringing materials
- ◆ Doing their work
- ◆ Picking up trash before leaving
- ◆ Walking quietly to lunch

But what if the students are *not* already doing these things? Mrs. Upbeat has a trick for getting students to do exactly what she wants. How does she do this? She thanks them *before* the behavior ever occurs. That's right! If Mrs. Upbeat sees a piece of trash on the floor, she thanks a nearby student for picking it up for her, and they just do it. Before class even began the first day, she thanked the students in advance for raising their hands to speak (even though none had spoken yet), saying that she just "can't hear when everyone is speaking at once."

Mrs. Upbeat has even become a master at giving criticism in a positive and praising way. "Oh, I just love that idea you have for the topic of your paragraph. As soon as you get those details in correct order, however, it will be just awesome. May I suggest that you use this detail first, and then build on that? And *please* let me see it as soon as you finish. I can't wait to read it!"

Mrs. Upbeat knows that even a negative situation can be dealt with in a positive way. She has bought in to the thinking that there are no bad kids, just bad decisions. Mrs. Upbeat knows that we must never attack the child, just the bad decision.

Mrs. Upbeat also knows that this attitude of hers cannot flicker or wane. It must remain embedded in the day-to-day classroom setting in order for her and her students to be happy, positive, and ultimately successful.

Thank Me

*My teacher says "Thank you" for everything
For things you just wouldn't believe
So, teachers, I'm sending a message to you
One I hope that you will retrieve.*

*If you thank me for the little things
Where "thank yous" are not expected
Then the bad things (that I sometimes do)
Will soon be redirected.*

*Some of us need you to notice us
Whether for good or for bad
And it seems the bad kids get your attention
That they otherwise wouldn't have.*

*So thank me for smiling and walking in line
Thank me for listening and being on time
Thank me for doing my work and you'll see
That I'll be the best kid, for you, I can be!*

Elizabeth Breaux
Classroom Management Simplified

What Doesn't Work



Mrs. Downbeat's students, although they don't know it yet, will literally be beaten down from the minute they arrive in class. "Don't you even think about walking in my room with your shirt hanging out of your pants," she says to one student. "And if anyone else in here thinks they are going to come in looking like this, they are certainly mistaken," she bellows. She has managed to agitate (and lose) several students before the first bell of the new school year has rung. Mrs. Downbeat failed to notice that the other 20 students were dressed to code, so she missed a perfect opportunity to praise those who did it right! By the way, in most cases, if we simply praise those who are in compliance, those who are not will see what is expected and eventually come on board. Mrs. Downbeat could have asked that everyone check themselves to make certain their shirts were tucked in and then thanked them all for being so cooperative.

The bell rings and Mrs. Downbeat immediately lays down the law:

- ◆ “If you think you’re going to talk in this class, you’ve got another thought coming!” (I’ve still not figured out what “another thought” is.)
- ◆ “A few of you are in here for the second time. I hope you’ve learned your lesson. And don’t think you’re going to get away with anything this year!”
- ◆ “Detention starts today, for any of you who are interested.”

Amazingly—and understandably—in the first few minutes of class, Mrs. Downbeat has managed to draw out attitudes in her students that mirror her own. Several students have already begun to engage in the most detested of all disrespectful behaviors:

- ◆ Sucking teeth
- ◆ Eye rolling
- ◆ Pencil tapping
- ◆ Humming
- ◆ Ripping out and wadding up notebook paper
- ◆ Turning sideways in their desks
- ◆ Refusing to work
- ◆ Pretending to have sudden hearing loss
- ◆ Walking away

Do any of these behaviors look or sound familiar? Mrs. Downbeat has already managed to alienate her students on the very first day of school. I’ll spare you the agony of the rest of the details of a day—or worse, a year—in Mrs. Downbeat’s classroom. Suffice it to say that Mrs. Downbeat doesn’t do a lot of thanking and praising this year (or any year). She doesn’t believe in thanking students for doing something they are already expected to do. More lost opportunities...

Summary



The teacher’s choice is simply to *choose* to accentuate the positives or magnify the negatives. If you want a positive classroom environment in which students are eager to please because they know that their good acts and works will be validated, then start accentuating the positives—not just some of the time, but *all of the time*. If accentuating the positives doesn’t feel natural to you, then practice. Really, there’s nothing wrong with that. Literally make a list of all of the

positive things that go on daily in your classroom. Your list might look something like this:

- ◆ Brought materials to class
- ◆ Turned in homework
- ◆ Completed work
- ◆ Worked well in groups
- ◆ Raised hands to speak
- ◆ Picked up trash
- ◆ Volunteered to participate
- ◆ Helped someone else
- ◆ Said “thank you” or “excuse me” or “I’m sorry”
- ◆ Volunteered to help the teacher
- ◆ Passed out papers
- ◆ Wrote a nice topic sentence (if the rest is awful, compliment the student on what’s good first, then he or she will be willing to listen to what needs work)

CAUTION: Be genuine! Students see insincerities coming from a mile away. Contrary to popular belief, they are not easy to fool. Never praise a job that is not well done just because you want to shower students with praise. Find the good—the real good—and compliment that, but don’t neglect to fix what needs fixing!