



Greater Good in Education  
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

# BUILDING COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOM NORMS

*"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."*

—Henry Ford

## OVERVIEW

Students co-create norms that foster a welcoming class environment and ensure safe discussions among peers, and develop a personal goal to help implement the norms.

## PLANNING FOR IT

### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To build a positive classroom climate at the beginning of the year
- To create a classroom environment that encourages kindness
- To provide students with the opportunity to voice their opinions

### TIME REQUIRED

- Part 1: ≤ 1 hour
- Extensions: ≤ 30 minutes

### LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School

### MATERIALS

- Sticky notes, or a way to post comments online (e.g., Jamboard or Padlet)
- Anchor chart/poster paper, classroom board, or a shared digital document/space
- Markers and writing utensils
- [Recommended Classroom Norms and Moral Principles](#) Document

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Identify the importance of classroom norms and determine rights and responsibilities as a class
- Collaboratively create norms that create a welcoming class environment and ensure safe discussions among peers
- Create a personal goal to implement classroom norms

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Open-mindedness
- Perspective-taking
- Fairness
- Teamwork

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Non-judgment
- Open awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to reflect on norms that are part of your life, such as norms in your home or in the communities you are part of, including religious communities, friend groups, teams, etc. For example, giving your full attention to family members when they are talking to you.
- What perspectives, experiences, and biases do you bring to this topic? For example, what are your thoughts about family and/or friends checking their phones during a meal?
- How can you encourage students of all backgrounds to integrate their perspectives into this activity?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Read through the list of [Recommended Classroom Norms and Moral Principles](#). Reflect on which norms you think are critical to bridging differences, building empathy, and pursuing justice in your classroom.

### INTRODUCTION (10-12 MINUTES)

- Begin by introducing classroom norms and their importance by asking the class for their thoughts on what a norm is and how they can be helpful.
  - Share that a norm is an agreement and expectation of a group of people, such as a class, about how they will treat one another.
  - They are essential to create a strong community with trust and safety.
  - If helpful, provide two or three examples from the list of [Recommended Classroom Norms and Moral Principles](#).
- Give the class two minutes to silently brainstorm and journal about norms that are part of their life, such as norms in their home or in the communities they are part of, including religious communities, friend groups, teams, etc.
- Ask for volunteers to share specific examples of norms they thought of, and follow up by asking the class if any of these norms connect to norms needed in a classroom to support a caring and inclusive environment.
- Give students another 2-5 minutes to silently reflect and journal on the following questions:
  - How should we treat each other?
  - What do you expect from your peers? What should they expect from you?
  - Who holds power in our class?
  - How will decisions be made?

### SMALL-GROUP BRAINSTORMING (15-20 MINUTES)

- Divide students into small-groups and prompt them to come up with classroom norms they believe are essential to productive classroom discussions. If possible, students should write each norm on a sticky note or in a shared digital document, such as Google Docs, [Nearpod](#), [Pear Deck](#), and [Jamboard](#).
  - Share the following 3 norms/guidelines to get them started:
    - Challenge ideas rather than people.
    - Consider the diversity of the people in the room and imagine how others in the room might experience your comments.
    - Remember that mistakes are normal and are useful learning opportunities in meaningful discussions.
- After 8-10 minutes, ask students to put their post-it notes on a designated wall or board, or write them on chart paper or classroom board. For five minutes, have all students conduct a silent gallery walk where they silently read all of the sticky notes and suggestions.
- Either have the entire class or volunteers spend a few minutes grouping similar ideas together, moving sticky notes and suggestions into clusters.

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## NAMING NORMS (20 MINUTES)

- Come back together as a class and have student volunteers read aloud norm suggestions one cluster at a time. As a class, work together to name the norm for each cluster, and write the new norm under the group of sticky notes.
- **Support your class to use positive, actionable language for the norms.** For example, if students come up with the norm, "*Don't talk too much and not give others a chance,*" shift it to "*share talk time.*" See the [Shifting the Language](#) document for more examples.
- Continue until most sticky notes are represented into a classroom norm. If there are some left over, invite students to discuss them, and see if they fit in any of the already suggested norms.

*Teacher Tip: You may need to veto certain rules or include rules that students either don't want or don't think to include. In these cases, make sure to acknowledge and respect student contributions and explain the reasoning for your decisions.*

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## CLOSURE (8-10 MINUTES)

- Share with the class the '[Recommended Classroom Norms and Moral Principles](#)' document. **All of the norms in Appendix 1 are important, and we strongly recommend that they are all reflected in some way in your document.**
- Ask the class to share any parallels they notice between these norms with class-generated norms.
- **Check in if the class would like to shift any of the norms after reading the recommended norms. It's important the class identifies which norms from the list the class are missing, and see if they can integrate them into the class list.** As you finish creating the final list of classroom norms, share with students that these norms are grounded in basic, universal human rights and principles of fairness and justice.
- Once classroom norms are finalized, have 1-2 student volunteers draft the norms on chart paper labeled "Classroom Norms". Post the Class Norms in an easily visible location. Ask the class if they feel anything may be missing or needs to be amended or changed to ensure that all students feel comfortable participating, asking questions, and sharing their experiences/knowledge.

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## EXTENSIONS

1. Ask students to take a few minutes to review the final classroom norms individually or in small groups first, then as a whole class, using one or more of the following questions:
  - a. *Are there any norms we don't agree with? Why?*
  - b. *Are there norms that might be difficult for us to uphold either as individuals or as a group? Why?*
  - c. *What are ways that we can keep ourselves accountable to follow these norms in our class? What can we do to ensure everyone is able to uphold these norms?*
  - d. *How can you support your peers in creating a caring and inclusive environment?*
  - e. *What does it mean to challenge ideas not people? What does it mean to take responsibility for your impact on others? What about other norms on the list: what does it look like to uphold these norms in our classroom this year?*
2. Ask students to identify and write in their journal one norm they will focus on implementing during class time over the next week. In pairs, small groups, or as a whole class, have students share what worked and/or was challenging for them.

3. Choose one norm each week or bi-weekly to discuss what it looks like in class.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- What worked or didn't work in leading this practice? How did the students respond to the practice? Would you change anything for next time?
- Over the next week or two, do you notice changes in student interactions, language or behavior?
- Are there more ways you can integrate, utilize, or refer to the norms in your classroom?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A [review](#) of effective practices for developing classroom norms—along with other [research](#)—suggests that when students are involved in the process of setting classroom norms, they show a greater understanding of and respect for those norms. Making students [feel heard, valued, and respected](#), helps students see the classroom as a fair environment in which they can grow and succeed.

Furthermore, such involvement also seems to enhance [students' ability](#) to present their opinions, respect the opinions of others, assess conflicting views, negotiate, compromise, and find common ground—skills that will allow students to engage more effectively in the larger society.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Whether tackling a sensitive topic or engaging with general class material, [establishing a set of norms](#) to guide student discussion is a great learning opportunity. By having students participate in norm setting, you enable them to think critically about creating a welcoming environment and how to balance competing ideas and feelings in respectful and effective ways. You also enable them to reflect on the pillars of an ethical and caring community and to develop self-awareness, awareness of others and a deeper understanding of fairness and justice, [create equity within the classroom](#), and strengthen classroom belonging.

Further, by holding students accountable to those norms, you support students' development of essential skills for working on complicated issues in diverse groups. This is especially important for creating an environment where sensitive or charged issues will be discussed. Shared norms begin to build a foundation for safety within a community by setting expectations and accountability, especially in a classroom community.

## SOURCE

[Making Caring Common](#), Harvard University

[Generation Citizen](#)