

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Modifying the Learning Environment to Reduce Problem Behavior

Douglas Cullinan, Ph.D. • March 2009

Topic: Reducing Behavior Problems

Practice: Modify Environment

### Highlights

- Professor Douglas Cullinan, a member of the IES Expert Panel that authored the Practice Guide “Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom,” explains the key components of modifying a classroom behavior to reduce disruptive behavior.
- It is imperative that teachers expect all students to behave appropriately and to follow classroom rules.
- Teachers can revisit the use of time, space, rules, and routines to refine them and to provide an environment supportive of positive behavior.

### About the Interviewee

Douglas Cullinan is Professor in Special Education, North Carolina State University. Working in public schools and a juvenile correction institution, he has taught students with disabilities of behavior, learning, intellect, and emotions. He received the doctorate in Special Education from University of Virginia. As a faculty member in special education since 1973, he has prepared teachers and other special education professionals at bachelor’s, master’s, and

doctoral degree levels.

Cullinan's main professional interests are the nature, measurement, scope, and improvement of behavior and emotional functioning of students. Scientific research and textbooks in these areas are among the more than 125 publications he has authored or coauthored. Cullinan has served as President, Council for Children with Behavioral Disorder, and in other roles within professional associations. He has directed grants supported by the U.S. Department of Education, and has worked on the editorial boards of several professional journals, including *Behavioral Disorders*, *Exceptional Children*, *Exceptionality*, *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, and *Journal of Special Education*.

## Full Transcript

I'm Doug Cullinan, Professor, Curriculum and Instruction at the College of Education, North Carolina State University.

Teachers must communicate the expectation and the belief and the vision that they have for kids in their class. And that is, each student and all students are going to succeed in what they have to learn, and they're going to succeed in following the class rules and behaving appropriately. This is stated verbally at the beginning. It's stated to the students. It is also communicated to parents, and it's communicated to the teacher's colleagues at the school. And in addition to verbally communicating it, the teacher has to communicate it in the things that she does. How do you teach things to kids? It's the way you teach things to anyone. You say what they are. You show how to do them. You practice with guidance and correction, and then you insist the kids practice on their own with less guidance and less direction as time goes by.

The teacher manages routines, rules, time, and space. Space is managed in a number of different ways. For example, a teacher should anticipate and act on what is going to be happening where in the classroom. Children's learning areas should be kept separate from high traffic areas because when children are moving around, it can be distracting. So there's one way that a teacher would manage space. The teacher also has to manage time. Teacher manages time by anticipating, as a matter of fact before the school year or semester begins, to anticipate how the entire curriculum is going to be subdivided into units and lessons and how a day's schedule will go. A third thing that the teacher would manage would be routines. Routines are ordinary ways of doing common tasks or behaviors.

The fourth thing that teachers use to activate expectations is rules. The teacher—alone or together with the students, depending on how well the students will take part in this—should develop a small number of rules. Rules should address the most common things that students are going to do wrong. There is no point in making a rule about something that's a rare situation. Commonly, there may be three to six rules. They may be something like this: come to class on time with all your work materials; follow the teacher's directions immediately; follow our classroom routines; during work time, work your best; keep your hands, your feet

and objects to yourself. There are five rules, some teachers may go with four, six, whatever. If you have too many, that could overwhelm, especially, younger elementary school students.

I want to emphasize that good classroom management in the elementary school calls for planning and implementing a sound plan for good instruction and good behavior management in order to prevent problems from happening in the first place. And it also calls for planning and implementing steps to intervene when a behavior problem does come up.