

Guidelines for Using Routines

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Introduction

Background and review of routines and their profound impact on social emotional functioning as well as their remarkable impact on engagement and work habits in the classroom can be found in these two seminal articles <https://kevinplummerphd.com/using-classroom-routines-to-create-a-therapeutic-brain-settling-effect/> and <https://kevinplummerphd.com/important-things-to-remember-about-routines/>, and in many other articles on specific types of routines (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/social-emotional-learning-routines/> and <https://kevinplummerphd.com/comprehension-guides-directory/>). This article will present guidelines for using routines, but it will only be helpful after reading one of the two seminal articles— just mentioned—on routine.

Routine is a significant regulator of the physical and emotional systems of the body and the brain. For example, when you travel and take a vacation and many of your routines are altered, it is disruptive at first to your digestive system, your sleep process, and your stress response, even though a vacation is something you want to do because it's enjoyable. Routine is a brain and body regulator in the classroom too, but it is also much more than that. It is probably the single most effective way to manage the class and to support the students as they try to learn, yet in many classrooms, truly effective routines are under utilized, or the routines that are used are too vague—ill-defined—or they're used only inconsistently. Precision and consistency is critical with routine. Without precision and consistency, the effectiveness of routines diminishes greatly and the effort invested in them is largely a waste of time. This article will help you achieve a critical level of precision and consistency so that your efforts will count toward your goals.

In the absence of properly constructed and properly implemented routines, teachers frequently over rely on verbal direction and repeated reminders and then reprimands. Over use of verbal

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reminders undermines the development of student independence, and over use of reprimands damages the teacher-student relationship and creates a negative classroom culture. These are consequences that are detrimental to student academic achievement.

Six Important Reasons for Using Routines

1) Routines teach. Routines teach the most important habits of successful learners, along with the most essential social emotional learning (SEL) skills. The classroom is the best opportunity to teach the habits of successful learners and SEL skills, in real time, as natural situations call for them, but they will not be taught effectively without embedding them in properly established routines. Classes can have routines for maintaining patience, for listening, for being kind and polite, calm and settled, engaging in group discussion, working cooperatively in groups, reading silently, asking permission, etc. These SEL skills and learning habits don't develop on their own, so they need to be taught, because they are vital to academic achievement and to success in life. In addition, these skills do not develop in social emotional learning skills classes. Educators would like those classes to be able to teach those skills, thereby lowering that burden on the classroom teacher, but the research shows that skill acquisition from the SEL classes alone is poor. Like learning how to ride a bicycle, only so much can be accomplished in a lesson that explains how to do it. The real skill comes from coaching and guided practice. SEL classes achieve increased SEL knowledge and social emotional awareness, but the actual skill acquisition is developed through guidance by the teacher in classroom situations that call for those skills, in contexts where the student can see the relevance (the social validity) of the specific skills. Properly constructed classroom routines give the teacher a practical and timely way to do that (e.g., (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/social-emotional-learning-routines/>)).

2) Routines create independence. Well-practiced routines establish neural networks that can be easily and effortlessly activated with a simple script or a few context cues (a cue can be like plugging in a string of lights—once one end is plugged in, the entire string becomes lit). Repeated practice of the same routines leads to the development of habits that can be triggered to occur automatically with just simple cues and brief reminders. The brain, specifically the neural network that becomes active at the initiation of a specific routine, supplies the prompting for the student (i.e., suggesting the behavior that the situation calls for), instead of the teacher being the one who has to constantly prompt and prod and urge the students along. Routines eliminate the need for lengthy explanations about what to do or how to conduct oneself, and this is how students develop greater independence.

3) Routines create the culture of the classroom. Routines in the classroom establish what is valued, what is important, how people will treat each other, what gets done, how it gets done and how students conduct themselves while they're doing it. Routines are used to establish and reinforce a positive culture in the classroom. Students achieve more, and grow and develop more, in a learning community that has a positive culture. Classroom management is less of a challenge in a class with a positive culture that is managed with SEL and work habits routines.

4) Routines create the structure of the classroom. Students rely on structure and predictability, and routines are the building blocks of that structure. Routines structure the class the way roadways structure automobile travel. Without structure, there is chaos, higher levels of stress, and diminished opportunity to learn. The class may have a routine for seatwork, for working independently, for breakfast or snack, for watching a video, for participation in whole class lessons, for math centers, for lining up, for restoring neatness to the classroom, etc. When the class is structured by routine, when the day is run through a series of set, connected routines,

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and nearly every activity that occurs during the day follows a predictable, explicit, and precise routine, the students feel more settled, reassured, more prepared, and more comfortable; and they can direct more of their resources to learning and better manage the small bumps and challenges that inevitably occur along the way.

5) Routines enhance cognitive functioning. Routines increase the predictability of so many aspects of the classroom process and this serves to lower student stress. Routine is like a medication. The more stressed, reactive, and emotionally dysregulated students are, the more we should run the day through routines. Routines provide the comfort of familiarity, the ability to anticipate and predict, and in this way, they settle the brain and body. In a more settled state the student brain can a) think more creatively, b) process more information, c) more rapidly integrate new information with existing knowledge, d) pay closer attention for longer periods of time, e) hold onto ideas and work with them, f) retrieve more from memory, and g) store more elaborate memories from the learning experience. Routines increase cognitive capacity for all of us, but if our job is to teach students, their cognitive functioning is our primary concern, so it is incumbent upon us to maximize cognitive functioning by running the class on routines.

6) Routines increase behavioral efficiency. When we are conditioned by routines, things happen more efficiently, more automatically. For example, a routine for a restorative break, if it becomes conditioned, can more quickly settle a student who has become stressed. A routine for a fire drill, if it becomes conditioned, can move students to safety more quickly and efficiently. Well-practiced routines supply students with clear and consistent memories and a multitude of markers along the way to remind them of where they are, what they are doing, what is expected, and what will happen next; and when this has become conditioned, none of it requires much conscious effort.

Three Important Differences Between Routines and Rules

1) Many classes have an abundance of rules and not so many properly developed routines. Rules are about right and wrong and usually they have to be presented in vague, general terms and left undefined (e.g., be kind to others or show respect) to avoid creating the need for so many. Routines are less about right and wrong and more about what fits and what works best in certain situations. They are also much more specific (e.g., instead of a rule about being kind, there is an entire routine about what it looks like and sounds like when being kind in various situations—<https://kevinplummerphd.com/wp-content/uploads/reset-for-kind-and-polite.pdf>).

2) Rules focus on correcting bad behavior while routines focus on teaching/instructing correct behavior. You may notice that rules are usually only mentioned when someone violates them, when the violator is in trouble or subject to disapproval. Routines are about good fit for the situation, not so much right or wrong, and they are mentioned frequently, not just when they are violated (prior to when they are needed and throughout the activity that is supported by them). In addition, routines are easily reinforced (because they are more explicit) when a teacher wants to notice how well a situation is working.

Correction that involves rule violations confronts students about what they're doing that they should not be doing ("That's extremely rude. Don't take that, put it back. You're not supposed to take things without asking."). Redirection and reminder about routines informs students specifically about what they should do more of ("You need to follow the politeness routine and ask permission before you use someone else's things.").

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Redirection to the routine teaches better behavior, one behavior at a time. The focus is on bringing about what is missing and building on that. Rules focus on eliminating inappropriate behavior, one behavior at a time, until eventually all that's left is the behavior that the rule wants. Rules assume that students know what to do and how to do it, and they will do it to stay out of trouble. Routines assume that students need to be taught (or they need to practice) what to do and this will require explicit redirection and reinforcement.

3) Students are less defensive, triggered less often, and they are more inclined to cooperate when they are reminded and redirected about the routine. Routines are supportive of emotionally-impacted students while rules have little impact on the wellness of emotionally-impacted students. Most students are more defensive and less inclined to cooperate when they are ordered to do something or when they are corrected about violating a rule. Redirection for violations of routines avoids triggering defensive behavior (or triggers much less defensive behavior).

Building a Proper Routine

A. What goes into a routine.

Routines have a set of clear expected behaviors and a list of activities, and these are displayed visually and spoken of using scripted language (language to remind ahead of time, and to redirect and reinforce throughout the routine—see "tips for communicating properly about routines" later in this article).

An academic routine includes:

- 1) the list of activities within the routine (e.g., what will take place during math)
- 2) the order of the activities (first you'll watch me do some problems at the board, then I'll have you work in pairs on some problems, and then you'll take turns working at the board so that we can discuss how you figured each one out).
- 3) the rituals associated with those activities (e.g., how students transition between the activities of the routine, what they do with their completed work, etc.)
- 4) the list of expected behavior that is required at various points in the routine (specific social emotional learning skills, such as listening during whole class teaching).
- 5) the language used to refer to the activities and expectations of the routine (scripts derived from the expectations in the routine)
- 6) a visual display that can be referenced easily by the teacher and the students, a display that incorporates the list of activities and the list of SEL skills and behavioral expectations.

A social emotional learning (SEL) routine includes:

- 1) the list of the expected behavior (specific SEL skills, e.g., cooperation, taking turns, sharing materials, etc.) that is required to support the activity (e.g., math centers) or to manage a common situation (e.g., expected behaviors while playing a game during free time).
- 2) a visual display of the list of expected behaviors/SEL skills.

B. When to create a routine.

Routines are not necessary in all situations. Only create routines that are needed to make the situation work better, and only create a small number of new routines at one time. Add to existing routines to address new concerns that develop, subtract from existing routines when

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pieces are no longer needed (simplify and condense the routine), and fade the use of the routine when students have internalized it and are doing it well (and doing it independently).

Classrooms that run by routine have routines for:

- lining up
- walking in the hallways
- transitioning between activities
- using leisure time
- every major academic subject
- using the bathroom
- group discussion
- independent work
- seeking teacher help
- using restorative breaks
- sitting in chairs and working at the desk
- working while sitting on the floor
- using alternative seating
- working in a group
- listening during whole class instruction
- resetting to calm and settled
- classroom neatness
- showing patience
- being kind and polite, and so on.

Routines are created to solve problems, so they are used when a situation is not working well.

For example, when a situation:

- is too noisy and chaotic
- creates too much conflict and emotional upset
- creates too much confusion
- requires too many teacher reminders.

Use a routine when you notice that important SEL skills are lacking. Create a routine for that particular skill (e.g., working cooperatively in a group). For examples of SEL skill routines, see <https://kevinplummerphd.com/social-emotional-learning-routines/>. Some SEL skill deficits don't matter much, because they don't have much to do with classroom or student functioning throughout the day, so a routine would not be necessary for those skill deficits. Only create routines that are necessary for the situation that needs to work better.

Routines are also used to increase engagement and to motivate students in situations that require several task shifts, extended work periods, or higher levels of academic stamina. These routines should show the progression of activities through an academic subject. This helps students engage by helping them anticipate what is next while becoming more aware of how much there is left to do.

Math Today

- Teacher instruction
- Four problems on your own at your desk
- Some students show their work on the board
- Discussion of work on the board
- Four more problems on your own at your desk

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- Hand in your completed problems
- Math game
- Put materials away
- Write the homework assignment down

This ability to anticipate helps students more easily shift their brains and warm up to the change in skill set and thinking required while putting away the skill set that should not be used (from listening to focusing and problem solving, to watching the work versus discussing the work, to cooperating with the group versus working alone at the desk, etc.).

Showing the progression of activities also helps students manage their stamina and their focus. They can see how much is completed and how much is left. They can also see the relationship between effort and outcome, how their effort is connected with getting things done. The reinforcement of effort leads to increased motivation and more effort. Lack of reinforcement of effort (e.g., "I work hard and it seems like I don't get anywhere) leads to diminished effort and reduced motivation. Showing the progression of activities helps students manage their stamina for the size of the task. They may see something later in the routine that they can look forward to, and this can further motivate them to get things done.

Some of the items on the task list could have their own routine (e.g., expected behavior while playing a math game, the established routine for handing in your work, expected behavior for participating in discussion, etc.).

How to Implement Routines Properly

Visual display. Routines are not just spoken about. They are visually posted when it is time to use them. The visual aspect of the routine is important because it more readily promotes student independence, compared to routines that are verbal only. Every day, for example, a new math routine may be written on the board and this routine should list the activities and the order of activities during the math period. You can also attach SEL routines to academic routines if needed (e.g., routines for the work habits that are critical to the success of the tasks on the list).

Visual referencing. The visual display of the routine should be referenced by the teacher (e.g., the teacher turns to and points at or reads from the visual display) when previewing what has to be done and what is expected, and when refocusing students during the routine. It is done in this way so students will learn to do this for themselves (they will reference it on their own) and will eventually require fewer reminders from the teacher (because the teacher will just reference the visual, which the student can just as easily do). In this way routines lead to the development of greater independence and self-regulation. Previewing a routine (more easily done by using a visual reference) helps students make the necessary mindset shifts and it helps with their warmup process, and all that enables a smoother transition.

Visual monitoring of progress. It often helps when the teacher crosses off the steps of the academic routines as the items in the routine are completed. This is so that students can see their progress through the activity and budget their resources (their effort, attention, patience, frustration tolerance, etc.) and stay motivated until they reach the end. This is another way that students can use visually supported academic routines to learn self-regulation. In addition, when items are crossed off as they are completed, students feel rewarded for their efforts along the way with a sense of completion.

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Redirection. During the routine, when students deviate from work habit expectations, they should be redirected to the specifics of the posted routine (right now we're in our silent reading routine and our routine for that is everyone picks a book, a spot to read, and then reads quietly for 15 minutes, so I'm going to have you follow that routine, pick a spot and start reading silently).

Visual for consistency. Use the visual reference to establish consistency and to remove any ambiguity about what is expected. The students get better at making their own decisions because they learn about how the teacher makes decisions. They learn that the teacher uses the visual display to check on their performance and to communicate about what needs to be done. Requests by students to do something that departs from the routine can be answered by referring to the visual display ("Let's check. Right now we're reading the chapter silently, so you can see that working on the computer comes here, right at the end of our ELA routine.").

Staying current. Pieces of the routine can be added when needed. They are not necessarily new pieces to the routine, just clarification of what was always expected but not previously stated because these behaviors didn't present as a problem until now ("During math, our routine is to let the person at the board work on the problem without any comments from the class until the problem is finished, so I'm going to have you hang on to your comments for now. Let's make that part of our routine.").

Reinforcement. Reinforcement and recognition should be provided to students who follow the routine. Remember, this is how students are taught anything that they have to learn (e.g., they're reinforced—told that they're correct—when they define a new word correctly). Reinforce the skills in the routine that take a bit of effort from the students, because those skills are not yet firmly established.

Reinforcement also sets an example (creates a model) for other students (reinforcement allows you to point out what it looks like and sounds like). In addition, reinforcement shows that the teacher notices and cares, she didn't forget (establishes the importance of the routine), and it establishes more visibility for the culture of the classroom as a productive place where students are trying to do well. Reinforcement should relate to something specific about the routine ("You got out your writing journal and started the writing routine without any reminders. I'm impressed.").

Redirection can also be provided in the same manner (The leisure routine says that everyone should put away their activities when the bell sounds. I want to give you credit right now for putting away your leisure activity, but I can't because the activity is still on your desk.").

Fading and condensing. The detail of the routine should be very specific when it involves teaching an emerging skill (e.g., see the specifics of being kind and polite in the classroom, at <https://kevinplummerphd.com/wp-content/uploads/reset-for-kind-and-polite.pdf>). Once the specific skills are well developed, the fully detailed routine is no longer necessary, but "be kind and polite" as a whole (without the details) can now be included in or added to any other routine (e.g., working in a group routine). Details should be faded after the skills have been acquired and the habits internalized (demonstrated with consistency and with reduced adult prompting and support). Sometimes a routine needs to be fully detailed again if students forget, but this reintroduction or emphasis is usually only needed for a short period of time.

Tips for Communicating Properly About Routines

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Communication about routines should condition the brain (by using the same predictable scripts), eliminate arguments (by pointing to the same visual), and provide explicit verbal instruction regarding what is expected (when redirection is needed).

1) Scripting. Your language about routine should be highly scripted, so you can say the same thing in the same way each time (and the visual aspect of the routine helps you remember this). The precision in language enables much quicker processing of the information because the brain thinks ahead, and when it recognizes the first part of the script, it fills in the rest before the rest is even spoken. In this way, the established script becomes a self-control device and the student is less dependent on the teacher's words as the controlling force.

"The routine for asking for help is. . ." (the student's brain fills in the rest before the teacher even completes the rest of the script).

2) Positive and Specific. Your language about the routine should be positive and specific instead of negative and vague. Tell the student what is expected instead of telling the student what not to do, and the more specific it is the more instructive it will be.

"The routine for group discussion is: 1) listen patiently to the person talking, 2) think about something to say that is related, 3) get permission to speak, 4) use a classroom speaking voice, and 5) give your input in a polite manner" (instead of saying, "Don't be so rude. That's not how you participate in a class discussion, do a better job next time").

When students become distracted or forgetful they should be directed back to the specific routine by using language from that routine.

"Right now, the routine is (point to a visual of the routine) that everyone is working quietly and working hard at their desk, so that's what I want you to do" (instead of saying, "Stop fooling around and wasting your time. You're not getting anything done").

3) Keeping Correction Neutral Instead of Personal. Using language from the routine enables the teacher to provide correction of behavior without making it personal, without raising defenses, and without creating misperceptions, which often occurs with correction when established routines are not in place. This type of language also reduces defensive behavior by eliminating the use of "I" statements embedded in the correction.

"The routine for asking for help is to use a polite request and then wait quietly and patiently for the teacher to respond. That's our routine, so I'm going to have you follow that" (instead of saying, "I've already told you to stop shouting out. Is that how you ask for help in this class? Why don't you ever listen to me the first time?").

The language of routine can avoid having the direction sound like a personal attack and it can help the student access the memories associated with the established routine, keeping students in the present and preventing misperception.

4) Affirmative Responses Instead of Questions. When the teacher uses language from the routine it allows the teacher to respond to requests affirmatively, rather than in the negative and rather than with confrontational, provocative and challenging questions ("Is that how you're supposed to line up?").

"Can I do my math on the computer?"

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Say this:

"Let me check the routine (a visual). The routine says that computer math is after you finish with the worksheet, so yes, you can do your math on the computer, once you finish your worksheet."

Instead of saying this:

"No, you can't use the computer. Is this the time for the computer? Don't keep asking me about the computer. You should know better than that by now."

Redirecting through the routine is one way to eliminate over use of the word "no". Over use of the word "no" can trigger defiance, distress reactions, irrational thinking ("I'll never get to. . . , you never let me. . .") and oppositional behavior. When students make requests that cannot be granted, refer to the routine.

"Right now, the routine is math and we're finishing our math papers. Ask me about playing cards when it's time for leisure break."

Yes, you can get a drink, but first finish your math paper, then get your drink."

It's difficult to reduce negative responses, because that's how our impulsive brain works. When we see something or hear something that we don't like, we experience a negative emotion/discomfort and instantly think "no", not that, stop that. If we want students to feel less triggered and we want their requests to also be an opportunity to learn something, we have to be just a little more reflective in controlling the first impulse that pops into our brains (and routines give us a chance to do that). It's not necessary to completely eliminate the word no from our directions and from our responses to student requests, but we should try to reduce the frequency.

Additional Resources

Using Classroom Routines To Create A Therapeutic Brain Settling Effect

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/using-classroom-routines-to-create-a-therapeutic-brain-settling-effect/>

Important Things to Remember About Routines

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/important-things-to-remember-about-routines/>

Social Emotional Learning Routines

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/social-emotional-learning-routines/>

Social Emotional Learning Soft Skills for School and Life

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/soft-skills-for-school-and-life/>

Improving Comprehension of the Nuances of Routines

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/improving-comprehension-of-the-nuances-of-routines/>

Routine Card Independence Program

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/routine-card-independence-program/>

Comprehension Guides

Guidelines for Using Routines

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/comprehension-guides-directory/>

Staying Neutral A Warm-up Routine

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/staying-neutral-a-warm-up-routine/>

Visual Feedback Systems

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/visual-feedback-system-program-guidelines/>

Visual Systems To Increase Motivation And Support Better Decision Making

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/visual-systems-to-increase-motivation-and-support-better-decision-making/>

Therapeutic Communication

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/therapeutic-communication/>