

# Creating an organized, emotionally safe classroom

**“T**eachers can do little to rectify the devastating home lives many children endure; but we can provide another reality when children are in school, creating an environment where they feel safe, accepted, nurtured, and respected. In this environment, children can be taught alternatives to the violence that surrounds all of us, helping them perceive hopeful options for their futures.” Naomi Drew<sup>1</sup>

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Respect,  
belonging,  
safety, tolerance,  
patience, and  
cooperation are  
the hallmarks of  
the classroom  
community that  
the teacher and  
students are  
creating.

Safety is an emphasis in today's schools. Typically, we think of safety as physical safety, and we want to protect children from violent acts. Rightly so. In addition, though, we need to be thinking about and working toward emotional safety for children. Indeed, school appears to be a fearful and unhappy place for many students. Research is showing that children who are the frequent victims of teasing and bullying are not faring well in school. In fact, their grades deteriorate and their fear often leads to absenteeism, truancy, or dropping out of school.

*The Community Building Series* provides instructional options for creating emotionally safe classes. The programs include procedures and materials that teachers can use to create a sense of community within inclusive classrooms. The three major outcomes associated with the series are that students feel both physically and psychologically safe, that students become involved in activities

without fear of ridicule or rejection, and that the learning and performance of students is enhanced.

The instructional programs in the series have been validated through intensive research involving about a hundred teachers and almost a thousand students in a series of research studies spanning six years. The programs emphasize the instruction of skills associated with treating others with respect as well as skills related to interacting in positive ways with others and encouraging and supporting others.

Research has shown and teachers have reported that the instruction of these skills makes a significant difference with regard to student deportment in class as well as with regard to how students treat each other.

All of the programs in the *Community Building Series* were developed for inclusive classrooms in which students with disabilities are enrolled. Built into all of these programs is the support that students with disabilities and other at-risk students need from a peer partner in order to be successful. When these programs are used, not only do all students in the class learn the targeted skills, the teachers' lectures or discussions become more organized, their instructions are more focused and clearly delivered, and their instruction, in general, becomes more structured. Thus, these programs not only help students learn new skills that they

<sup>1</sup> Bluestein, Jane (2001). *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools: A Guide for Educators and Parents*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.

can use in any academic setting; they also help teachers become better instructors.

The purpose of this article is to describe the two newest additions to the series: ***Organizing Together*** and ***Taking Notes Together***. *Organizing Together* focuses on helping students keep their desks, notebooks, lockers, and backpacks organized. *Taking Notes Together* helps students learn to take notes during lectures and discussions, during demonstrations, and while watching videotapes.

### Organizing Together

“If only I had enough time to get organized...” is a lament common to many. Indeed, “organization” is often not a concept easily understood or practiced by all students. They have only a vague notion of procedures that would help them become more productive and efficient.

The *Organizing Together* program enables students to establish order in their daily lives. Time is structured into the class schedule to create an organized learning environment, and students have models and partners to help them learn, apply, and maintain organizational strategies throughout the school year.

Specifically, students learn how to organize their notebooks, desks, lockers, and backpacks. In addition, they learn how to use a weekly calendar to record and remember assignments and events.

The program is not contingent upon students having all of the materials specified in the lessons (for example, notebooks, desks, lockers). Teachers can choose the most relevant lessons or adapt instruction to accommodate their needs.

Individuals who have found this program beneficial include general education teachers, seminar and homeroom teachers, tutors in after-school programs, teachers of first- and last-hour classes, and special education teachers.

### Overview

The *Organizing Together* manual presents each lesson in

two formats:

- A “Play-by-Play” format provides an in-depth description of the instructional procedures used in the program.
- An “At-a-Glance” format outlines the main instructional procedures in a brief, one-page lesson guide that can be used as an outline once the teacher is familiar with the procedures.

## Organizing Together Lessons

The program presents skills and concepts through five lessons summarized below.

**Lesson 1: Learning Community & Notice Your Neighbor.** Critical to the success of the program is the “Notice Your Neighbor” Strategy, which is introduced in Lesson 1. This strategy sets up support for students who might need the help of a partner when they are learning complex skills or following a complex set of instructions. The lesson is used to teach students to observe other students to ensure that they are following instructions as needed. It also is used to teach students to be helpful to one another. Teaching students these skills is a prerequisite to creating a learning community in which everyone helps each other learn.

**Lesson 2: Notebook Organization.** Students collect the needed materials, and, with the help of their partners and structured step-by-step guidance from the teacher, they build a notebook that corresponds to the subjects they have each day. They learn a short strategy (File, Retrieve, Clean) for maintaining order in their notebooks. Teachers use these terms throughout the day and schedule time daily for organization.

**Lesson 3: Time Organization.** Students are introduced to the use of calendars as an organizational tool. The Calendar Strategy (Listen, Locate, & Log) helps them remember how to record assignments given by the teacher. They practice recording assignments and events.

**Lesson 4: Desk and/or Locker Organization.** This lesson provides a blueprint for organizing a desk or locker. Teachers structure the lesson around the storage unit available to the students, and again, students work together to set up and maintain the organization.

**Lesson 5: Backpack Organization.** Students learn the importance of keeping their backpacks neat and orderly and are guided through the steps related to setting up an organized backpack. The teacher uses the same terms (file, retrieve, clean) as in previous lessons to prompt students to stay organized, and as with the other lessons, schedules time

The manual includes checklists related to using calendars and to organizing notebooks, desks, backpacks, and lockers.

### Field-test results

The *Organizing Together* program was formally field tested with six teachers and their students. The 124 participating students ranged in age from 7 to 10 years old. Twenty-seven percent were students with exceptionalities, and 32 percent of these students represented minority populations.

The results of the field test indicated that students in the experimental classes who had participated in the program knew significantly more about how to create a classroom community than students in the comparison classes. They could define concepts such as respect and tolerance and name and explain the skills necessary to create a learning community.

Experimental students understood and could more accurately use a weekly calendar, and their notebooks, desks, backpacks,

and lockers were substantially more organized than those of comparison students.

Both teachers and students strongly endorsed the program. Students' comments included, "I like this program because now I know where all my stuff is," and "Now everything is in the right place!" Teacher comments included, "I really liked having students organize everything in a uniform way" and "I think these lessons are great!"

The overall satisfaction rating with the program provided by teachers was 6.7 on a 7-point scale ("7" indicating extremely satisfied.)

## Taking Notes Together Lessons

The program presents skills and concepts through the four lessons summarized below.

**Lesson 1: Learning Community & Notice Your Neighbor.** Since an understanding of the basic concepts associated with learning community are critical to the success of students, the starting point for instruction in this program focuses on those concepts. If students have recently received instruction in one of the other *Community Building* programs, teachers skip this lesson. Others use it as a review.

**Lesson 2: Taking Notes During Lectures.** Students are introduced to the concept of taking notes. They learn the important elements of an outline and how to identify those components when listening to a lecture. They also are introduced to the "JOT" Strategy, which they use to structure their notetaking efforts. "JOT" reminds students to "Jot important information," "Obtain details," and "Talk and compare."

**Lesson 3: Taking Notes While Reading.** Students learn how to apply the JOT Strategy when they are asked to take notes about a reading assignment. They discuss written clues (for example, bold-face print, italicized print) an author may provide to emphasize an important piece of information. Clues are divided into "main idea" clues and "detail" clues. Practice passages are included for students until they reach mastery and are ready to apply the strategy on grade-appropriate content.

**Lesson 4: Taking Notes While Watching Videotapes.** In this lesson, students learn how to apply and practice the JOT Strategy while watching a videotape. They discuss important clues in videos (for example, words on the screen, music change) and practice the JOT Strategy on short video segments. Teachers also are encouraged to use this lesson to teach students to apply the JOT Strategy when they watch demonstrations.

### Taking Notes Together

Listening, selecting critical information, and recording that information during a lecture can be a challenging task. Although some students learn to take notes independently at an early age, others do not. If students don't develop a good "strategy" for organizing and recording information, they may struggle to efficiently capture the essence of a lecture, videotape, or reading assignment throughout their school careers.

The *Taking Notes Together* program provides a framework for learning how to take notes and provides to teachers a structured method to use to deliver information when they want students to take notes. Indeed, an important part of the program involves organizing information for students in such a way that the major concepts are clear.

When teaching students to take notes during lectures, teachers must prepare lectures around the main ideas and details they want students to identify and understand.

Similarly, since most text-

books contain much more information than students need to know, teachers must provide specific guidelines about the structure of student notes (for example, what topics within the text are most important, how many details should be recorded, and so on.)

Finally, if students are to make sense of the many pieces of information found within a video, they must receive a brief overview of the main topics and details within the videotape before the movie begins.

Such explicit, well-organized instructions provide important practice that will enable students to become independent and proficient notetakers.

### Overview

The *Taking Notes Together* manual presents each lesson in the same two formats as *Organizing Together*: “Play-by-Play” and “At-a-Glance.”

### Field-test results

The *Taking Notes Together* program was field tested with 12 teachers and their students. A total of 379 students, ranging in age from 8 years to 12 years, participated in the study. Thirty-four percent were students with exceptionalities, and 30 percent were students representing minority populations.

Significant differences were found between students who participated in the *Taking Notes Together* program (experimental group) and students who did not (comparison group).

Experimental students answered significantly more questions correctly about learning communities, working with partners, and taking notes. Additionally, they understood and could more accurately and

comprehensively take notes related to lectures, reading assignments, and videotapes than comparison students.

Both students and teachers strongly endorsed this program. Students' comments included, “It was fun taking notes,” “The JOT Strategy helped a lot. It made notetaking easier and faster,” “I like that if you missed something your partner could help you,” and “I liked taking notes in an organized manner. You don't have to shuffle through papers to find stuff.”

The average satisfaction rating for teachers was 6.9 on a 7-point scale (with “7” being extremely satisfied). Comments included, “One of the best programs yet!” “All the skills are relevant and positive,” “This is a wonderful program! I am excited about using the lessons next year,” and “I am very pleased with the results I am seeing.”

### Not just elementary

Although the programs were field tested with third- through fifth-grade students, they can be adapted for older students. The topics, concepts, and skills incorporated within the lessons of *Organizing Together* and *Taking Notes Together* are appropriate for all age groups. With minimal planning, age-appropriate examples and activities can be substituted for those suggested in the manual, and questions can be formulated to promote thoughtful responses and in-depth discussions.

### Community of the future

Through the use of instructional programs such as those in the *Community Building Series*, a sense of belonging, feeling connected and valued, and enjoying the support of classmates can

replace feelings of fear, anxiety, and trepidation in the classroom. Students can participate in discussions without fear of humiliation, and they can feel physically and emotionally safe in school.

These feelings need to be created through explicit instruction, continuous and specific feedback about behaviors that do and do not contribute to a learning community, and compassion and respect for the diversity of students and how they learn.

Teaching students confidence- and competence-building skills and how to create a learning community is a good way to start.

Marion Wright Edelman suggested, “We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make.”

The *Community-Building Series* provides the guidelines for teaching the concepts and skills students can use to become effective learners. In all lessons, celebrations are held to recognize the efforts of individuals and groups, and respect, belonging, safety, tolerance, patience, and cooperation are the hallmarks of the classroom community that the teacher and students are creating.

—The *Organizing Together* and *Taking Notes Together* manuals are available from Edge Enterprises, 708 W. Ninth Street, Suite 107, Lawrence, KS 66044. Edge Enterprises may be reached by phone at (785) 749-1473 or toll-free at (877) 767-1487. Fax: (785) 749-0207.

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## Bookmark this idea for fun

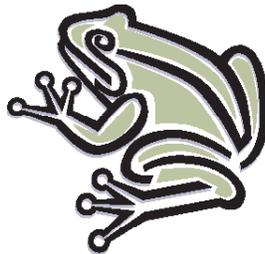
David Wallace, a SIM Professional Developer from Maquoketa, Iowa, has designed a series of bookmarks for the *Word Identification* and *Paragraph Writing* strategies. The bookmarks presented here are adaptations of David's designs, which have been a big hit with students, he reports.

David's originals make good use of color. His *Paragraph Writing* bookmarks, for example, are designed using a different color of type for each step.

"Students like the colors for the *Paragraph Writing Strategy*," he says, "and it's a rare person who doesn't like cute frogs."

David's secretary, Norma Round, tracked down the cute frogs used in his original bookmarks. You may download David's full-color bookmarks from our web site:

<http://kuurl.org/downloads>



### WORD IDENTIFICATION

- Discover the context
- Isolate the prefix
- Separate the suffix
- Say the stem
- Examine the stem
- Check with someone
- Try the dictionary



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### Paragraph Writing

- Step 1: **S**et up diagram
- Step 2: **C**reate the title
- Step 3: **R**eveal the topic
- Step 4: **I**ron out details
- Step 5: **B**ind it together with a clincher
- Step 6: **E**dit your work



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## Fundamental cue cards

**Bev Simpkins**, a strategies teacher at Cobb Middle School in Tallahassee, Florida, developed these two cue cards for *Fundamentals in the Sentence Writing Strategy*.

“In *Fundamentals*,” Bev says, “students are introduced to parts of speech that are ‘impostors’ in sentences. Infinitives are sometimes mistaken for verbs, and prepositional phrases are sometimes mistaken for subjects.

“These cue cards can be used as overheads so that students can take notes or can be made into posters for the classroom.

“In the manual, students are provided more information and examples of prepositions and infinitives.”

## Infinitive

- Usually made up of two words
- Made up of 'to' and a verb

Example:            I  
                         Jane likes to camp.

## Prepositional Phrase

a group of words that show the place or time (where or when the action takes place)

Example:            I            P  
                         Jane likes to go to the camp.

# Writing strategy extension activities



**Glenda Fries**, language arts teacher at Chase Middle School in Topeka, Kansas, has developed a number of activities to accompany writing strategy instruction. The activities on this page are just a sample of her many good ideas.

## Coloring activity

This activity can be used with any writing assignment. For example, Glenda gave the students an essay topic: “How I’ve Survived Sixth Grade.” Then, she gave them the following requirements:

- Title
- Topic sentence
- 3 Action verbs (trace with red colored pencil)
- 3 Subjects (blue)
- 3 Linking verbs (yellow)
- 3 Prepositional phrases (green)
- 3 Infinitives (orange)
- Conclusion

The essay also must have at least two of each type of these sentences:

- SV
- SVV
- SSV
- SSVV

## Newspaper activity

When reviewing sentence types, have students get copies of the newspaper. Students will read articles and look for the types of sentences they are reviewing. Students also can circle adjectives, adverbs, or any other part of speech.

## Categories

Have students sit on the floor in a circle, legs crossed. Students will slap legs twice, clap hands twice, and then snap fingers twice. The teacher will start the game by saying “Categories, Such as, Names of.” Then, the teacher will announce what the category is. The class will go around the room one at a time and name something that fits the category. If a student can’t keep the beat or repeats an answer that another student already has given, he or she is out. The game continues with the remaining students. The following are possible categories:

- Action verbs
- Nouns
- Proper nouns
- Infinitives
- Subjects
- Linking verbs

## Story stretches

(45 minutes)

Have students build a story using simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. The students will take turns saying their sentences out loud, with all sentences building together to create a funny story. Some suggested topics:

- The worst teacher I ever had!
- Our principal
- Something smelled in the hallway
- What’s in the closet?
- Middle school

## Mini-chalkboards

Have students use mini-chalkboards to write their sentences instead of using a worksheet. For some reason, writing on mini-chalkboards is a lot more exciting for them. The sentences can be checked by their peers and by the teacher. One idea that is fun is to have the students hold up their chalkboards. The teacher can either say “yes” or “try again.”

## Relay

Divide the students into two teams. Each team will send one student to the board to receive a question, formula, or sentence to write. This is a fun way to review before a test. The students seem to like the competition

### Stratagem

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