

# S<sub>t</sub>rat<sub>e</sub>gram

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## Focusing Together

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Practicing responsible work habits. Showing respect for self and others. Knowing what to say and do in order to create an emotionally and physically safe learning environment.

These are outcomes for students when teachers intentionally establish learning communities in which students learn to respect and value each other's differences. The *Focusing Together* program can help teachers build such a learning community. It is an instructional program that promotes and teaches self-management behavior in association with a set of classroom expectations that defines responsible work habits, respect, and emotional and physical safety.

*Focusing Together* is part of the Community Building Series, a set of instructional packages that teachers can use to create a sense of community within inclusive classrooms. The three main outcomes associated with the program 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 are enhanced.

### **Focusing Together and Positive Behavior Support**

All methods and procedures used in *Focusing Together* are consistent with

the underlying principles associated with a Positive Behavior Support (PBS) system (Horner & Sugai, 2005; Sprick, Garrison and Howard, 1998; Sprick, Knight, Reinke, & McKale, 2006). PBS is a research-validated approach that can be used to eliminate inappropriate behaviors and replace them with prosocial skills, or skills that benefit the entire learning community.

PBS is an approach that supports the inclusion of students with disabilities in today's classrooms because inappropriate behavior is one reason these students are often separated from their peers. However, Horner et al. (2005) contend that PBS is an approach that can be used with *all* students because students come from a wide range of cultural, financial, and social contexts in which behavior expectations may differ. Thus, teachers who adhere to a PBS approach ensure that students have opportunities to differentiate between what is defined as acceptable and unacceptable behavior and also offer students recognition for exhibiting appropriate behavior.

PBS is a comprehensive behavior approach that is compatible with the notion of building an inclusive learning community. The *Focusing Together* program is a proactive approach to classroom management because, when taught with fidelity, teachers have the



opportunity to create a classroom learning community where all members feel safe and protected so that inappropriate behaviors are less likely to occur in the first place.

Importantly, the skills and concepts learned in *Focusing Together* are foundational to becoming a positive and productive member of the classroom. However, once students master the skills, they may apply them across other school settings and throughout their lives.

### **The Focusing Together Lessons**

The first thing students learn as they proceed through the program is how to live by a set of learning community expectations that help them know how to interact positively with others and complete their work in a timely manner. Second, students learn how their choice of whether or not to abide by the expectations in certain situations will affect their personal power. Finally, students learn a self-management strategy (the FOCUS Strategy) that will help them stay on task when asked to work independently or in small groups.

The *Focusing Together* manual presents worksheets and activities appropriate for both younger and older students. It also presents seven lessons 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 instruc-

Figure 1. Overview of the Focusing Together Lessons

#### **Lesson 1: Introduction and Overview**

The teacher grabs students’ attention by reading them a story titled “Lessons from the Geese” as an example of how members of a community can help and support one another. Students learn how they can create a community based on how geese create a community. The teacher uses a visual organizer to give students a “big picture” or overview of the coming lessons. The teacher also guides students to identify some expectations for members of an effective learning community.

#### **Lesson 2: Our Learning Community Expectations**

The teacher displays a list that summarizes the expectations brainstormed in the first lesson. Students agree on a list of Learning Community Expectations. They identify benefits of following the expectations as well as consequences for noncompliance. Students participate in a game activity that helps them learn the expectations and identify situations in which they can use them. The teacher then administers a written quiz to determine student mastery of each of the learning community expectations.

#### **Lesson 3: Making Good Choices**

Students participate in a discussion to learn about the relationship between particular choices they make about meeting or not meeting the expectations and the consequences—negative and positive—related to those choices. They learn how to analyze problem situations and recognize how making good choices can affect their personal power.

#### **Lesson 4: Introduce and describe the FOCUS Strategy**

Students are introduced to the steps of the strategy. They discuss the characteristics of an unfocused worker versus a focused worker as well as the results of managing yourself versus not managing yourself.

#### **Lesson 5: Model the FOCUS Strategy**

Students watch the teacher perform the FOCUS Strategy in an entertaining way. They observe the teacher’s cognitive, physical, and verbal behaviors related to the strategy steps.

#### **Lesson 6: Verbal Practice of the FOCUS Strategy**

Students practice naming the steps of the strategy. They receive a bookmark as a cue card for helping them remember the strategy and the classroom expectations. Students then take a written or oral quiz to demonstrate the ability to name the steps and explain the importance of using them.

#### **Lesson 7: Practice**

Students are provided opportunities to practice the strategy and self-monitor their application of the strategy by completing a FOCUS Checklist. At the end of this lesson, students voluntarily sign a commitment to use the FOCUS Strategy and to build good learning partnerships.

tional procedures in a brief, one-page lesson guide that can be used as an outline once the teacher is familiar with the procedures.

Figure 1 on page 2 provides an overview of the *Focusing Together* lessons.

### Teaching the Concept of ‘Learning Community’

Lesson 1: Introduction and Overview discusses the idea of a learning community and how students work together to support one another. The lesson uses a story, *Lessons from the Geese*:

In the fall, we can see geese heading south for the winter. Geese always fly along in V formation. This is what science has discovered about why geese fly that way:

As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird right behind it.

By flying in V formation, the whole flock adds at least 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

When one goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone. It quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front.

When the head goose gets tired, it rotates back to another position in the wing. When that happens, another goose flies point.

Geese honk from behind and encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

Finally... and this is very important. When a goose gets sick or hurt, it falls out of formation. Two other geese then fall out with that hurt goose and follow it down to lend help and protection. They stay with the fallen goose until it is able to fly or until it dies. Only then do the two helping geese launch out on their own to catch up with the group.

(The version of this story in *Focusing Together* was adapted and reprinted in part with the permission of its author, Dr. Robert McNeish.)

After reading the story, students are invited to share their ideas on how to create a classroom community based on how geese create a community. Figure 2 at right gives an example of student responses generated as a result of making that

comparison.

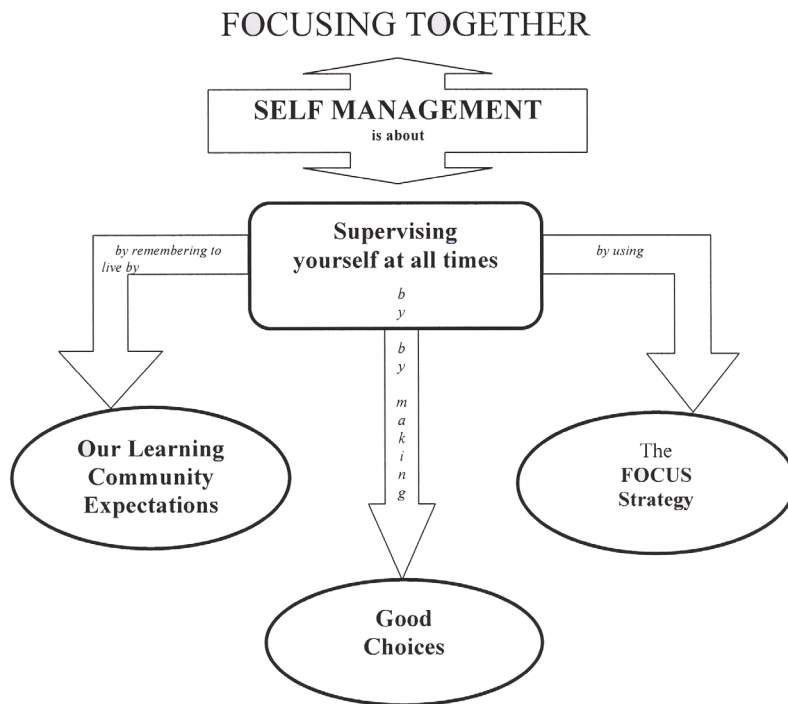
Once students understand the concept of a learning community, the teacher presents a unit map (Figure 3 on page 4) that directs student attention to what they will be learning as they proceed through the program.

As noted in the Unit Map, students first learn that the program is about learning to be good self-managers and that “self-management” in this program is defined as “supervising yourself at all times.” The three other components of the map (Our Learning Community Expectations, Good Choices, and the FOCUS Strategy) contain skills and ideas that are important for students to learn to become good self-managers. The Unit Map plants the seed for what students can expect to learn as they proceed through the lessons. It sends the message that student ownership and

Figure 2. Comparing Functions of Geese and Students in a Community

Geese	Students
1. Geese have the same goal: to get to a certain place.	1. Students have the same goal: to be good learners.
2. To do this, they fly in the same direction.	2. To do this, they study the same things.
3. They find it easier to fly in formation than alone.	3. They find it easier to work together than alone.
4. They don't bump into one another.	4. They don't bother other students as they work.
5. They do their individual jobs.	5. They create original work.
6. They help geese who are sick or hurt.	6. They help students who have trouble learning.
7. They take turns leading.	7. They take turns leading activities or helping each other.
8. They honk to encourage others to keep flying.	8. They encourage other students to keep trying and learning.

Figure 3. Unit Map



responsibility are vital ingredients of a positive learning community. It also conveys to students that the teacher cares enough to teach them the skills for how to function successfully in the classroom.

### Rationales for ‘Our Learning Community Expectations’

The Learning Community Expectations presented to students in *Focusing Together* are based on the principles of responsible work habits, respect, and safety. These are important principles to live by in the classroom, in the school, in the community, and on the job. The expectations also are based on what the literature describes as effective rule design because classroom rules are typically used by teachers to define behavior expectations.

Specifically, we learn from the literature that a good classroom

rule begins with an action word, is stated positively, is observable and measurable, and is specific in nature, yet transferable across school settings. Classroom rules also should be reasonable and acceptable to diverse learners while defining what students are expected to do to be successful members of the learning community. Clarifying what students are expected to do, and helping them learn it, is more effective than management that focuses on misbehavior after it occurs (Rademacher, Callahan, & Pederson, 1998).

To select the appropriate expectations for Lesson 2 (Our Learning Community Expectations), we conducted a study with 1,246 students in grades three through eight. These students completed a questionnaire to determine their opinions about the importance of each of

10 classroom rules (for example, “Follow directions,” “Signal to speak,” and “Keep hands, feet, objects to self”). Each of the 10 rules listed on the questionnaire met the criteria for effective rule design according to the literature. The results of this study revealed that students, on average, rated each of the rules as “important” to “very important.”

In addition to rating the rules, students were asked to write what they believed teachers could do to help students learn and follow the rules. Specifically, students commented that teachers should teach rules, remind students when they break rules, post rules, and reward students when they follow them. Thus, suggestions from the literature, as well as what students validated as important rules and procedures for teaching them, were incorporated into the *Focusing Together* lessons.

During the final revisions of the *Focusing Together* program, the authors determined that the term “expectations” would be used to define students’ behavior for three reasons. First, it was evident from their written comments on the rules questionnaire that some students view rules as negative and punitive in nature, rather than as guidelines for helping them learn and get along with others. Second, expectations are more closely associated with the notion of what one *can* and *should* do to be personally responsible for one’s own behavior. Third, some schools have a set of prescribed rules that each classroom teacher is expected to enforce, making it confusing

to have two sets of rules. Thus, having a list of learning community expectations is more personal and can be associated with, or compared to, the school rules if necessary.

Once the learning community expectations are established, it is important for students to understand the associated consequences for noncompliance, as well as the benefits for choosing to live and work by them. Lesson 2 gives specific ways to involve students in this process as well.

### **Teaching Students How to Make Good Choices**

During Lesson 3: Making Good Choices, the teacher requires students to examine the relationship between “choice” and “consequences.” Together, they practice analyzing behavior and consequences according to a Personal Power Formula,  $E+B+C=Personal\ Power$ . “E” stands for “Event,” or what happens first that leads you to choose a behavior. “B” stands for “Behavior,” or how you choose to act. “C” stands for “Consequence,” what happens to you and others after you act. “Personal Power” is the control you have over what happens in your life. You gain more control when you make good behavior choices.

This lesson is important because some students may only realize negative consequences associated with making the wrong behavior choices in particular situations. It is important for students to understand the positive consequences that can occur as a result of making the

*right* behavior choices. Learning to think before acting can have a dramatic effect on one’s personal power. Personal power is important throughout life. Adults make choices each day that support their personal power. Students need to learn the process for making appropriate choices at an early age. Lesson 3 provides a means to do so in an interactive and fun way.

### **Teaching the FOCUS Strategy**

The FOCUS Strategy is only presented to students once they fully understand the learning community expectations and how their choice of whether or not to abide by the expectations will influence their personal power. The teacher then proceeds through Lessons 4 through 7 to teach the strategy through mastery.

Specifically, the steps of the FOCUS Strategy are as follows:

- Free your mind of distractions
- Organize yourself
- Check the expectations and get started
- Use help wisely
- Supervise yourself

To use help wisely, students are taught a sub-strategy using the following steps:

- Think before asking for help
- Ask at the right time
- Signal and work while waiting
- Know what to say once the teacher is available to assist with the problem

To introduce and describe the

strategy, the teacher engages students in a discussion of what it means to be an “Unfocused Worker” versus a “Focused Worker.” For students who may benefit from visual clues, a set of cartoons is included in the manual that illustrates an unfocused worker and scenes for each of the strategy steps.

During Lesson 5, the teacher models the FOCUS steps for students. Next, in Lesson 6, the students participate in rehearsal activities to master the strategy. Finally, in Lesson 7, students are given an opportunity to self-monitor their own application of each strategy step by completing a FOCUS Checklist as they work on an independent learning assignment. The checklist requires students to rate themselves: “2” means they performed the step all of the time, “1” means they performed the step some of the time, and “0” means they performed the step none of the time. After rating how well they did on each step, they reflect on their overall performance and set a goal for the next practice activity. Figure 4 on page 6 depicts an example of the FOCUS Checklist.

Once students have mastered their use of the FOCUS Strategy, the teacher summarizes the program through another presentation of the Unit Map and discusses each of the guiding questions. The class then revisits “Lessons from the Geese” and what they have learned about becoming responsible and productive members of the learning community. Finally, the teacher and students sign and post a con-

Figure 4. FOCUS Checklist

		ALL	SOME	NONE
F		2	1	0
O		2	1	0
C		2	1	0
U		2	1	0
	T	2	1	0
	A	2	1	0
	S	2	1	0
	K	2	1	0
S		2	1	0

**Which FOCUS Step do you do best?**

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**Which FOCUS Step do you need to work on?**

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**What is your GOAL the next time you practice FOCUS?**

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tract that states: “We want to be a learning community of responsible learners by following our learning community expectations, making good choices, and staying FOCUSed.”

**Field-Test Results**

The *Focusing Together* program was field tested in 2005 with eight teachers and 225 of their fourth- and fifth-grade students. Four of the teachers served as experimental teachers, and the other four were comparison teachers. Researchers observed a subset of 40 students (five from each of the experimental and comparison teachers’ classes) both before and after the experimental teachers taught the *Focusing Together* lessons. Each subset of five students included one high-achieving, one average-

achieving, and one low-achieving student, and two students who were identified as having a learning disability. Researchers observed each subset of students during three separate 15-minute intervals of independent work time to determine the effects of the program on off-task behavior (such as being out of seat, talking, playing with objects, and not following the teacher’s directions).

The results of the study showed no difference between the experimental and comparison groups at the beginning of the study. However, there was a significant difference between the groups at the end of the study with regard to off-task behavior. Specifically, the experimental and comparison students engaged in an average of 21 and

22 off-task behaviors, respectively, within 45 minutes at the beginning of the study. After instruction in the experimental classes, experimental students engaged in an average of five off-task behaviors, whereas the comparison students engaged in an average of 18 off-task behaviors.

In summary, after learning how to follow a set of effective classroom expectations, how to make good choices, and the steps of the FOCUS Strategy, students reduced the number of off-task behaviors in which they engaged during times they were expected to work independently. Teachers also reported satisfaction with the program and the students’ behavior. In addition, students were more pleased at the end of the study than at the beginning.

**Summary and Implications for Practice**

Effective instruction for all students begins when teachers intentionally establish positive learning communities in which students learn to work responsibly, show respect for others, and understand what to say and do to be emotionally and physically safe. *Focusing Together* is proven to be an effective instructional program that teaches self-management behavior in association with these principles. As students proceed through the lessons, they begin to understand their roles and responsibilities and to develop skills for working in a self-directed manner.

Whether you are a very expe-

rienced teacher or relatively new teacher, the need to create learning communities has never been greater. Students come from a variety of cultures, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and religions, and they come to school with a variety of social and academic skills and varying levels of readiness to learn. As a result, creating a safe and predictable learning environment where all learners feel a sense of value and belonging and become active in the learning process is a prerequisite for their success.

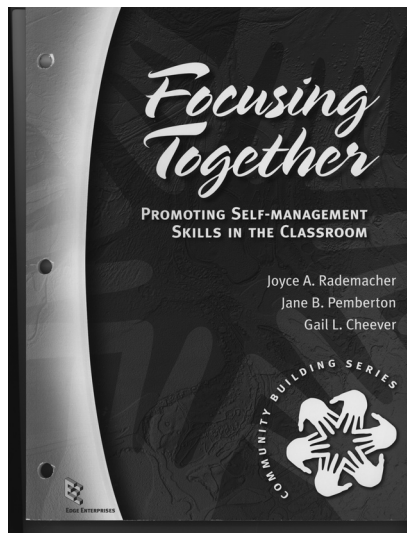
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Instructional materials for this component of the Strategic Instruction Model are available from Edge Enterprises, 708 W. 9th St., Lawrence, KS 66044; toll-free 877.767.1487.

### KU-CRL CALENDAR February 21-23, 2008

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Charleston, SC  
Reservations: 843.722.0600 or  
877.756.2121 by January 20, 2008  
Contact: Jerri Neduchal  
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### May 27-31, 2008

SIM Learning Strategies Institute for  
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Lawrence, KS  
Contact: Mona Tipton (mktatz@  
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### May 27-31, 2008

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### June 18-21, 2008

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## Focusing Together in Higher Education

If you are a university professor, the *Focusing Together* program may provide a road map for your students to follow, as behavior management is frequently reported to be of high concern for both student teachers and first-year teachers. Lessons 1 through 7 can be used as lesson planning tools to teach the program's necessary skills and concepts. For example, *Focusing Together*

provides scripted examples that clearly delineate the goals and preparation activities associated with each lesson. The manual also provides suggestions for what teachers may say and do as they present each lesson to their students. As a result, your students may take the *Focusing Together* lessons directly from the university classroom to their "real world" classroom.

### STRATEGRAM

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## NEW ONLINE

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