

Nonverbal Communication Practices

The following article is from the nea.org website, and my responses and approach to the principles described are contained in the text boxes included.

Good Body Language Improves Classroom Management

Successful Teachers Blend both Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

By Teal Ruland, special for NEA.org

Effective teachers use body language to communicate with students, build rapport with them, and make them feel safe and supported.

“Face the student with arms uncrossed and relaxed,” says Mindy B. (on [NEA Today Facebook](#)) “and usually always smiling! Give them eye-to-eye contact, and pay attention to them! By doing this, I’m conveying the message that ‘I care!’”

“The ability of a teacher to establish positive rapport with students is a critical aspect of the teacher-learner relationship,” explains Ron Benner, a school psychologist in Bridgeport, Connecticut. “The successful teacher blends both verbal and nonverbal communication skills in establishing good rapport with students and this has a direct correlation to student achievement.”

One of my goals is to positively greet the students at the start of every class immediately after the bell rings, letting them know that class has started, and that I welcome their presence.

With multiple class periods, it’s important to have the start of class routine established so that students know what to expect. For this, I plan to have an online class announcement, and/or a summary slide on the projection screen at the start of class. It will have instructions for what materials the students need to have ready to begin work. By having that in writing, I can walk around the room and greet students, directing them to the posted instructions as needed.

Test your understanding of your students and how your body language affects them by standing in the doorway of the room as your students shuffle in. This close contact sets up a naturally occurring single file line that calms them before they enter the classroom and enables a positive learning environment before they even sit down, according to body language expert Chris Caswell.

Proximity is a very powerful tool that I intend to use as much as possible. I have found that it is a good way to re-engage disengaged students in a somewhat subtle and yet direct way. Rather than calling out a student that is distracted, I prefer to make my way to a location near them and quietly redirect their attention to the classroom activities.

Being near the door as they enter is very valuable for students who have need

for extra time to take care of personal matters, and/or retrieve materials that they may have forgotten. Reminding them to address these needs quickly facilitates a quicker start of classroom activities.

From the start, command the classroom. Greet the class with a loud, clear, upbeat voice. If you look frazzled, you seem vulnerable. Lack of confidence is a red flag to students.

Tone of voice is extremely important. I strive to be upbeat as much as possible, and also loud and clear. My personality is somewhat “mellow” though, and I have had times when I don’t feel “in command.” On those occasions where I have raised my voice, I am quick to resume a normal, and positive tone of voice, ensuring that my purpose was not to express anger, but to gain their attention.

Another key aspect is the pacing of communication. A common example is in those cases where equipment is not working right. I have found that it helps to have a calm, slowly paced response to those situations which communicates that there is nothing to worry about – we’re working on getting this fixed, and we will be back up and running in a minute.

Body Language Dos and Don'ts

Where and how you stand in the classroom speaks volumes, too.

- **Stand up straight.** Poor posture—slumped shoulders, stomach sticking out—is not only physically unhealthy, but it can convey a whole range of attitudes and degrees of interest and respect.
- **Avoid folding your arms, standing behind a desk, and using barriers.** These behaviors “simply sends the signal that you don’t want to make contact,” says Caswell. It blocks you off and makes you appear unapproachable. Don’t cross your arms or shuffle papers that aren’t related to the lesson, and refrain from looking at your watch when a child is speaking.
- **Use the whole classroom.** Walk around the students’ desks to show interest, and indicate approval with a head nod. Caswell suggests leaning slightly forward and moving momentarily into their territory in a nonthreatening way.

I seek to have an open posture at all times. I also try to vary the location from which I speak, staying near the projection screen, whiteboard, and/or smartboard only when necessary.

My goal in teaching physics and/or science is to open with whole class instructions, and get through them as quickly as possible. At that time, students should begin work as individuals or in groups, and my role is to circulate around the room, answering questions from students. The quicker I can have the students initiating requests for information, rather than me sending them information, the better.

A very valuable tool when working with presentations is a remote control. I plan to use one whenever and wherever possible.

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- **Be aware of your facial expressions (or lack thereof!).** They can easily convey any number of moods and attitudes, as well as understanding or confusion.
- **Smile.** It conveys happiness and encouragement. Frowns show sadness or anger. Big, open eyes suggest fear. An animated face draws the listener in.
- **Make eye contact.** It helps establish rapport and trust, and it shows that you’re engaged and listening to the students.

One of my challenges will be to avoid a pensive or less than upbeat mood as my energy may fade during the course of a day. Working with students can be challenging at times, and I will seek to give my later class periods just as much emotional energy as I give the periods earlier in the day.

A positive attitude is vital, and whether it's a big smile, or just a facial expression that indicates that I'm glad to be here, I see that as vital to my role as a teacher. If I'm not excited about the lesson, why should the students be excited?

Another goal I have is to see every question as a helpful one. There are times that a question indicates that a student was failing to pay attention, but I need to remember that much less than 100 percent of new concepts and/or instructions are absorbed the very first time.

In addition, I also have a goal to avoid taking a class's lack of engagement, or wealth of distractions, as a personal insult. It's really not about me. It's about the students, and helping them get the most that they can from each class period.

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- **Adopt different poses** when you want your students to respond in a particular way.
- **Your hand on your chin** encourages students to think about the answer and shows you're waiting for their answer.
- **Hands out and palms up** shows that you're open to questions and answering in a nonthreatening way.
- **Observe wait time**—don't stare and rush them. Appear relaxed and ready to listen.

Body language helps you get your message across. Let students know that you want to create a supportive, productive learning environment.

Wait time is a challenge for me, and yet one in which I have gained skills in using. Again, it's not about me telling the students what they need to know, but finding out what they know and don't know.

Another area of using wait time is in classroom management situations where I give a student specific instructions, and they are hesitant to comply. I have found it helpful to simply stop and wait – letting them know that I am willing to do so, and hope that they understand that class activities are being delayed by their lack of action.

This also works with getting the whole class's attention. Simply raising a hand, waiting for students to notice, and then letting them inform each other of the need to "settle" helps them take ownership of the class environment.