

# Creating Classroom Rules for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A Decision-Making Guide

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A high degree of teacher turnover occurs within the educational system, with exiting teachers often crediting student misbehavior as a contributing factor (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005; Eberhard, Reinhardt-Mondragon, & Stottlemeyer, 2000; National Education Association, 2003). The behaviors of one population, students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), often present significant challenges for classroom teachers (Kauffman & Wong, 1991). Based on these behaviors, educators often characterize students with EBD as aggressive, disruptive, or off task (Sutherland & Singh, 2004). Such behaviors may occur concomitant with, or as a result of, shortfalls in expressive or receptive language functioning (Benner, Nelson, & Epstein, 2002).

These language deficits may exacerbate both social interaction and academic performance problems as students with EBD fail to understand events or are hindered in their communicative skills (Ruhl, Hughes, & Camaratra, 1992). Displaying low academic proficiency, students with EBD receive some of the lowest grades of any group of students with or without special needs, and as a result, students with EBD maintain a very high drop-out rate (Sutherland & Singh, 2004). Given the challenging nature of learners with EBD, one question begs asking: How can teachers who serve students with EBD respond so that students with EBD can function effectively regardless of setting? One answer lies in classroom management and structure.

Students with EBD receive services in a variety of settings (e.g., resource, self-contained, and inclusive classrooms), and the absence of clear structure in any of these settings negatively affects learning and effective behavior plans (Malone, Bonitz, & Rickett, 1998; Steinberg & Knitzer, 1992). Unlike effective teachers who monitor classroom behavior, provide clear expectations (e.g., classroom rules), and promote student accountability for meeting those expectations (Stevenson, 1991), some teachers of students with EBD fail to use effective classroom management techniques (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). Rules, which might be considered one form of communicating expectations, may constitute the most cost-effective form of classroom management and play an important role (Bicard, 2000).

Rather than viewing rules as elements of control, rules might best be conceptualized as contributing to a classroom environment conducive to learning. Through teacher presentation of rules, students learn boundaries for classroom behavior and the Dos and Don'ts of classroom life (Boostrom, 1991). Importantly, rules may help students with language problems better understand expectations and set the stage for positive environmental influences for effective classroom behaviors.

As an important aspect of classroom management systems, rules play a major role and bear heightened significance for teachers serving students with EBD. However, creating effective rules requires careful thought and effort. This paper presents six questions facing teachers

as they create classroom rules and recommendations for effective rule creation, while addressing specific concerns for those who serve students with EBD.

## Six Rule Decision-Making Questions

Teachers can ask themselves six questions as they create effective classroom rules: (1) Who will participate in rule creation? (2) What behaviors will serve as the basis for the classroom rules? (3) How will I phrase the classroom rules? (4) How many rules should I use? (5) How will I communicate the rules to my students? and (6) If applicable, what will I do to support student rule compliance? Along with recommendations and considerations for students with EBD that accompany each question, we will follow Christina, a fictitious middle school teacher, as she makes rule creation decisions. During the academic year, Christina will have responsibility for a class of 25 students, 3 of whom have an EBD label. Talking with teachers from the grade below her and drawing on her own experiences, Christina identifies the need for a high level of structure in her classroom for this upcoming group of students and plans to create this structure around classroom rules.

### *Question 1: Who Will Participate in Rule Creation?*

Teachers must first decide who participates in rule development—the teacher only or the teacher and the students. Stevenson (1991) maintains that students play an informal role in rule creation, because rules follow

student and classroom needs. Bicard (2000) suggests an extension to this informal role would involve students participating in rule creation. If students have a greater hand in rule creation, they may better relate to the rules and comply more often (McGinnis, Fredrick, & Edwards, 1995); however, such an inclusive approach may be counterproductive in settings serving students with EBD for several reasons.

First, students with EBD may better respond to established structure and boundaries for behavior from the moment they enter a classroom. Having clearly specified rules helps students with EBD know what they are to do. Waiting to involve them leaves many opportunities for students to engage in unacceptable behaviors as they wait for rule development. Second, establishing rules with student input may prove difficult logistically, especially considering mixed populations of those with and without EBD. Students with EBD may lack the capacity and social awareness to participate cooperatively in rule creation, thus limiting their contributions and possibly making it difficult for their peers. Third, students tend to have a harsh sense of justice and often recommend extremely strict rules (Bicard, 2000; Heins, 1996). While teachers will find it important to create precise, clearly worded rules and implement those rules consistently, teachers using overly restrictive rules may set students with EBD up for failure. Considering these factors, it seems prudent that teachers create an initial set of rules without student participation and then include student input as warranted.

Christina made a decision to create her rules without student input and, in fact, before students arrived in her classroom. She did not, however, develop these rules without previous knowledge. She incorporated her own experiences with student-specific knowledge garnered from teachers from earlier grades.

Understanding that unforeseen situations may arise, Christina reserves the opportunity to make minor modifications to her rules list with student input. She feels confident, however, that her rules cover both pressing and future classroom problems and enable her class to interact with the rules from the first day of school.

### ***Question 2: What Behaviors Will Serve as the Basis for the Classroom Rules?***

Logistics prevent a teacher from creating, teaching, and implementing a rule for every student behavior, predicted or observed. Because of the prominent nature and applicability of rules, teachers should reserve rules for minor but chronic and/or severe student behaviors. Minor aversive behaviors generally have short-term adverse effects on the environment. Over time, however, these minor behaviors can cumulatively add up to cause a more significant impact on the environment. For example, one call-out every period may not adversely affect the classroom or cause physical harm, but multiple call-outs every few minutes may prove very disruptive. While possibly occurring with less frequency, severe behaviors can have immediate and dangerous effects on the classroom and those in the classroom. Some examples of severe behaviors include property destruction and physical harm to self and others. Because students with EBD often display both chronic and severe behaviors (Sutherland & Singh, 2004), teachers can target these behaviors as a foundation for classroom rules.

Before Christina can address rule creation, she must determine the needs of the classroom. Christina initially chose to focus on potentially chronic and severe behaviors that her students may exhibit. These behaviors would interfere with instruction, student transitions, and may place students or others in physically dangerous situations. Based on her knowledge of the

incoming class, she has identified eight possible chronic and/or severe classroom behaviors (*Figure 1, Step 1*). Now that she has a basis for classroom rules, she can make decisions on the remaining questions.

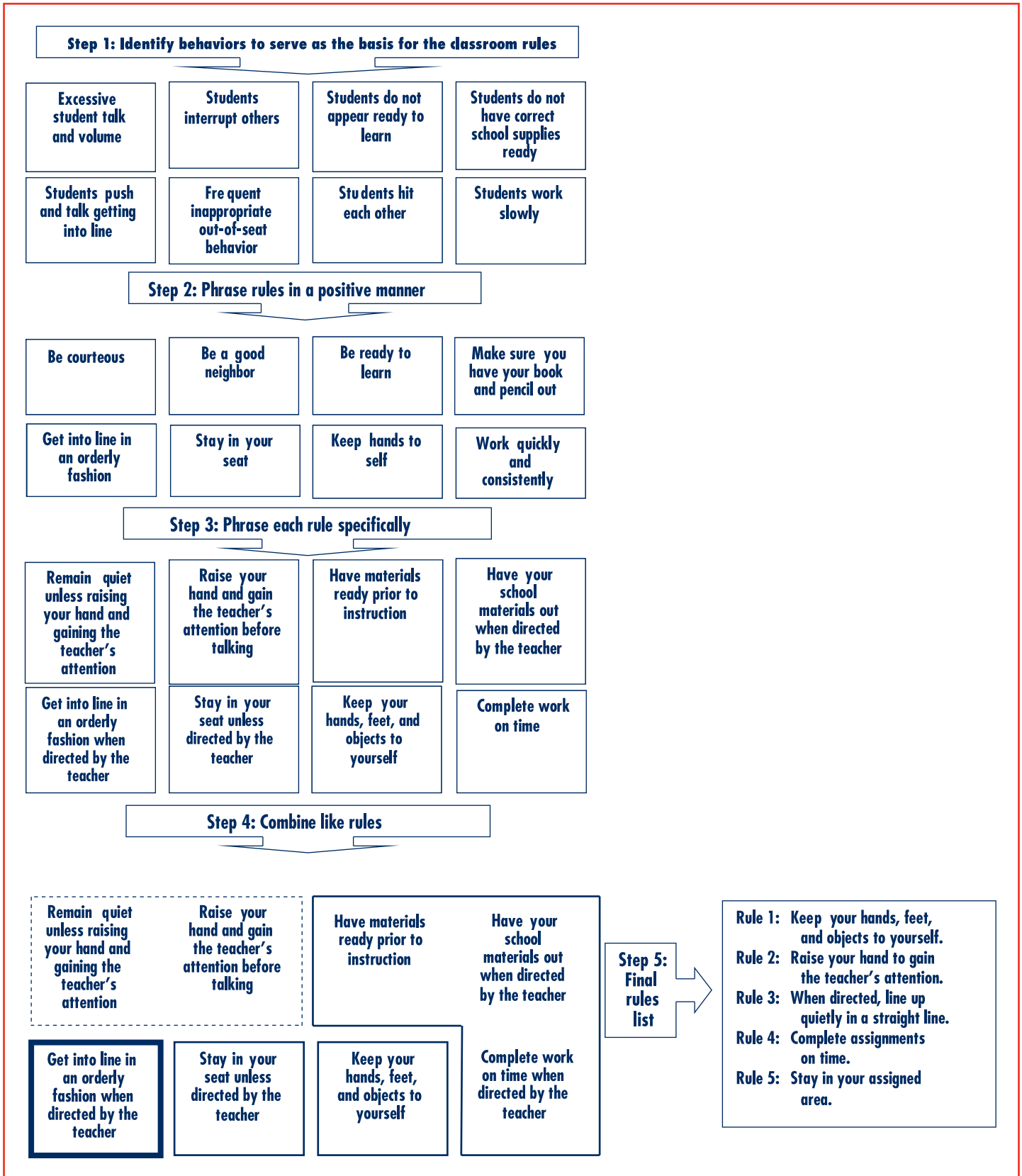
### ***Question 3: How Will I Phrase the Classroom Rules?***

The third decision regards how to word the rules. This has two aspects: rule type and rule wording specifically. Bicard (2000) describes two types of rules: positive and negative. Positive rules focus on what a student should do and help teachers concentrate on helping students acquire appropriate and useful behaviors. Negative rules state what students should not do and focus teacher attention on student misbehavior. Positive rules encourage use of positive interactions, while negative rules promote using aversives and punishment. Because a teacher's primary responsibility involves creation not elimination of students' behavior, many educators (Bicard, 2000; Heins, 1996; McGinnis et al., 1995) have promoted using positively stated rules. Using positive rules for students with EBD, who will likely benefit from a positive educative approach, may prove beneficial.

As with many teachers, Christina found it easier to focus on aversive student behaviors. Without asking herself this rule creation question, she may have easily fallen into the trap of phrasing each rule in a negative manner by creating rules similar to "Don't hit each other" and "Don't talk out," leaving a void about desirable and permissible behaviors. To avoid this, Christina can take rule phrasing one step further by asking herself, "What is the desirable behavior I wish to see?" and then formulating the more positively stated rule to better communicate with students. *Figure 1, step 2* illustrates her revisions using this positive approach.

Once changed into a positive rule, teachers must determine each

**Figure 1** THIS FLOW CHART SHOWS CHRISTINA'S TRANSFORMATION OF CLASSROOM NEEDS INTO CLASSROOM RULES ANSWERING RULE CREATION QUESTIONS



**Table 1** RULE TYPE AND WORDING

Wording	Type	
	Positive	Negative
Specific	1. Raise your hand to gain the teacher's attention 2. Keep your hands and feet to yourself 3. Have your school materials ready when needed	1. No talk outs in class 2. Don't hit anyone 3. Don't fumble with your school supplies
Nonspecific	1. Be courteous 2. Be a good neighbor 3. Be responsible	1. Don't bother others 2. Don't be a meanie 3. Don't waste time

Note. Examples focus on target behaviors for (1) gaining attention, (2) minimizing inappropriate physical contact, and (3) being prepared to learn.

rule's specific wording. Rules must convey meaning as effectively and efficiently as possible. Thus, teachers should avoid using vague rules that neither let the student know what to or not to do. Teachers using vague rules may find it difficult to observe rule-following behavior as the teacher and students may interpret the rule differently (Bicard, 2000; Murdick & Petch-Hogan, 1996). Conversely, explicit, briefly, and clearly worded statements foster straightforward, precise, and easy to understand and remember rules (Bicard, 2000; Heins, 1996; McGinnis et al., 1995). Thus, rules should focus on specific observable behaviors rather than non-specific generalities (e.g., "Raise your hand to gain the teacher's attention" vs. "Get attention the right way") (Bicard, 2000; Heins, 1996; McGinnis et al., 1995). Due to a prevalence of language disorders among students with EBD, clearly worded rules promote understanding. Rules that tell students with EBD exactly how and when to behave are desirable. *Table 1* shows different effective and ineffective ways to word rules targeting three areas of concern.

Returning to Christina, we notice she has worded her positively phrased rules in a vague manner (e.g., "Be a good neighbor," "Be courteous," and "Be ready to learn"). For many teachers and students, especially students who present with emotional and behavior deficits, rules phrased in this manner provide too

much "wiggle room" leaving the rule open to different interpretations. For example, "Be courteous" may mean standing when a teacher enters the room, sharing food, or raising a hand to gain the teacher's attention. In order to convey her intended meaning, Christina would need to reexamine her positive rules for any that appear vague and reword them to read specifically, leaving students no room for misunderstanding the expectations. *Figure 1, Step 3* shows these changes.

#### **Question 4: How Many Rules Should I Use?**

A fourth rule creation question asks how many rules to put into practice. Boostrom (1991) recommends teachers avoid having too many rules to minimize student confusion. Fewer statements make it easier for a student to remember how they should or should not behave. However, by employing too few rules, teachers can provide too much room for student error. An optimal number of rules represented in the literature (Bicard, 2000; Heins, 1996; McGinnis et al., 1995) ranges between three and five.

Christina noticed as she worded and reworded her classroom rules, some appeared similar and/or overlapped with others. To pare her list from eight to the suggested three to five, Christina chose to combine rules addressing similar behaviors. For example, Christina addressed

classroom challenges focusing on unnecessary student noise and excess interruptions with the simple rule, "Raise your hand and gain the teacher's attention." As displayed in *Figure 1*, Christina combines like rules (Step 4) and settles on a list of five rules following final revisions (Step 5).

#### **Question 5: How Will I Communicate the Rules to My Students?**

McGinnis et al. (1995) suggest increased student compliance ties into the ability of students to readily recall and recite the rules, which links directly to rule presentation. Two methods of rule presentation include publicly posting the rules and clearly teaching rules to the class (Bicard, 2000; Heins, 1996; McGinnis et al., 1995). Rules should be posted where all learners can observe them and in a manner that enables teachers to readily make reference to them. Younger learners and those with language difficulties may also benefit from pictorial illustrations of the rules.

As with academic behaviors, teachers should present rules using effective instructional practices. One form of instruction, direct instruction, seems appropriate for students with EBD due to its explicit nature (Gunter, Coutinho, & Cade, 2002). After explaining a rule's goal and importance, a teacher would model examples and nonexamples of rule-following behaviors. Through guided practice, each student would have the opportunity to either answer

questions about or role-play rule behaviors. Finally, the teacher would evaluate each student's independent performance. This form of practice and feedback would especially benefit students with EBD who may need extra practice and attention with rule-following behaviors.

Christina plans to create a permanent rules list to post in a location visible to all students. She has also prepared lessons to explicitly instruct each of the rules through examples and nonexamples. Using the first few days of school for these lessons seems especially important and feasible. First, rule instruction marks student boundaries from the start, setting the stage for an effective year. Second, rules instruction would not take up precious academic time as most academic instruction has not started. *Figure 2* presents a sample lesson plan for the rule "Keep your hands, feet, and objects to yourself."

#### **Question 6: If Applicable, What Will I Do to Support the Rules?**

This question involves two parts: rule applicability and teacher support. Teachers can decide after observing student behavior if the rules chosen apply to the current situation. Sometimes, teachers may follow effective rule creation criteria, only to have developed a rule that exceeds the ability of a student or students. Teachers can then determine if students require additional instruction on component rule-following behaviors or additional time to complete the rule (Rademacher, Callahan, & Pederson-Seelye, 1998). If a teacher deems the rules applicable, then the teacher can define their own responsibilities with respect to the rules they choose to employ (Rademacher et al., 1998). For example, teachers can adjust their physical presence (i.e., where they position themselves in the classroom) when a rule-related behavior comes into play.

Consider the rule, "When directed, line up quietly in a straight line." Initially, the teacher could

stand by the door before directing the students to line up helping to prompt rule-following. After providing the signal to line up, the teacher would watch for students having difficulties following the rule and also the amount of time it takes for all of the students to line up. The teacher might also inform the students of the amount of time required to line up, challenging them to beat that time. Results of these observations and proactive measures can facilitate students' successful rule-following.

Christina understands that the skill level of many of her incoming students will differ. Knowing that some of her new students may require additional assistance and teaching, she plans to closely observe student rule-following the first 2 weeks. This will allow her to identify any preskill deficits (i.e., how to stand in line appropriately) and if she has chosen the appropriate amount of time necessary to complete a rule (i.e., sufficient assignment time). Based on her observations, she can set aside one-on-one time with certain students to practice rule-following behaviors using lesson plans similar in form to *Figure 2*.

#### **Comments on Christina's Final Rule List**

Let's review and critique the five rules Christina created. First she chose "Keep your hands, feet, and objects to yourself." While this rule covers most physical acts of aggression, it does not promote socially acceptable forms of physical contact (e.g., high fives, shaking hands) or sharing (e.g., asking for or borrowing toys or school supplies). If necessary, Christina would have to address this with the class.

The second rule "Raise your hand to gain the teacher's attention" has both functional and portable attributes. Functionally speaking, students that raise their hand will often meet with attention, which will hopefully maintain hand raises. Christina can not only implement this

rule in the classroom, but on field trips or school assemblies requiring quiet behavior, displaying its portability. However, Christina may have her students in situations where students do not need to raise hands (e.g., classroom party, playground, field trip not requiring quiet) and would need to address these situations with her class.

The third rule, "When directed, line up quietly in a straight line," allows Christina to focus on almost any transition inside or outside the classroom. Some teachers may treat lining up in this manner as a routine behavior and choose not to create a specific rule. In Christina's case, she felt she needed to pay specific attention to minimizing transition problems. Based on her knowledge of her students, it seems appropriate that Christina made the rule.

Also portable, the fourth rule "Complete assignments on time" relates to any class, academic, or special (music, art, etc.) assignment, but requires that Christina inform the students of the conclusion of the task. Finally, Christina can use the fifth rule "Stay in your assigned area" in almost any situation. On the playground, the assigned area may comprise the fenced in area or with the team, on a field trip, the bus, or with the group, and in the classroom, the student's desk or group table. This rule also requires that Christina informs her students of the assigned area per activity. Looking at Christina's rules, she has chosen to target important and necessary behaviors for her students, phrased them in a functional manner targeting situations both inside and outside her classroom, and limited them to a manageable number of five.

#### **Additional Concerns Regarding Rule Use and Students with EBD**

After examining Christina's final rules list, one may note that these rules appear applicable to most students in educational settings, prompting the question "Don't

**Figure 2** THIS SAMPLE LESSON PLAN FOCUSES ON TEACHING THE RULE “KEEP YOUR HANDS AND FEET TO YOURSELF AT ALL TIME”

<b>Sample Rule Lesson</b>	
<b>Objective:</b>	Students will be able to repeat the rule “ <i>Keep your hands, feet, and objects to yourself</i> ” and be able to identify two examples and two non-examples with 100% accuracy.
<b>Rationale:</b>	<b>Teacher:</b> “Rules are very important in the classroom. They help everyone know what they are supposed to do and, in this case, help keep everyone safe. Now we are going to learn one of our classroom rules.”
<b>Lesson:</b>	<p><b>Teacher:</b> “Our first rule is: Keep your hands, feet, and objects to yourself. Class. What is our first rule? Get ready.” <i>Signal.</i></p> <p><b>Class Response:</b> “Keep your hands, feet, and objects to yourself.” (<i>Error correct as necessary</i>)</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> “Excellent. What is our first rule again? Get Ready.” <i>Signal.</i></p> <p><b>Class Response:</b> “Keep your hands, feet, and objects to yourself.”</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> “Good. Now we are going to practice some times that people do and do not keep their hands, feet, and objects to themselves. Class, am I keeping my hands, feet, and objects to myself when I am sitting at my desk quietly, with my hands on the desk and my feet on the floor? Get ready.” <i>Signal.</i></p> <p><b>Class Response:</b> “Yes.”</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> “Good. Am I keeping my hands, feet, and objects to myself when I push someone? Get ready.” <i>Signal.</i></p> <p><b>Class Response:</b> “No.”</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> “Good listening. Am I keeping my hands, feet, and objects to myself when I am tapping my foot? Get ready.” <i>Signal.</i></p> <p><b>Class Response:</b> “Yes.”</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> “Yes. How about if I am tapping my foot on someone else’s foot? Get ready.” <i>Signal.</i></p> <p><b>Class Response:</b> “No.”</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> “Your turn, can someone tell me a time when they kept their hands, feet, and objects to themselves?” (<i>Take 2 responses and discuss briefly instances of keeping your hands, feet, and objects to yourself</i>)</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> “Class, can anyone describe an instance of someone who did not keep their hands, feet, and objects to themselves?” (<i>Take 2 responses and discuss briefly instances of not keeping your hands, feet, and objects to yourself</i>)</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> “Great job, everyone. I am going to act out a few situations and ask you each time, Am I keeping my hands, feet, and objects to myself?” (<i>Possibly recruit a student or another teacher to act out four situations, 2 examples and 2 non-examples, and prompt a response from the class each time.</i>)</p> <p><b>Teacher:</b> “Great job everyone. Remember, keep your hands, feet, and objects to yourselves. We will cover our other rules later.”</p>

students with EBD need special EBD rules?" The answer: they do not. Throughout the process, Christina moved through rule creation targeting the potential needs of her students and classroom. More specifically, she paid special attention to behaviors that presented dangerous situations or interrupted instruction. Teachers who create rules addressing the specific behaviors of the class and students in question do not apply special, but rather appropriate rules. So in one sense, teachers create and use rules for students with EBD just as any teacher creates and uses special rules to meet the needs of their students, suggesting the process appears no different. However, teachers should realize that for students with EBD, rules may evoke responses other than those observed from students who do not experience emotional or behavioral difficulties.

Appearing aversive, rules often prompt negative reactions from students with EBD (Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993). In the presence of rules, students with EBD and their teachers may fall into various destructive cycles of inappropriate behavior. In response to inappropriate behavior created by the presence of rules, teachers may inadvertently maintain a cycle of coercion by using further aversive situations to control outbursts (Gunter et al., 1994). Additionally, in the presence of rules, students with EBD may avoid rule-following behavior altogether by escaping from academic, social, and rule demands by either behaving in ways that force their removal from the classroom or by blatant noncompliance (Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993; Shores, Jack, Gunter, & Ellis, 1993; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). Teachers, who create specific and positive rules as a basis for their classroom management system create a positive environment that both facilitates rule-following behavior and helps minimize negative cycles of inappropriate behavior by shifting teacher attention from inappropriate

to appropriate student behavior (Gunter, Denny, Jack, & Shores, 1993).

Once put into practice, teachers must eventually provide consistent consequences in response to rule-following and rule-breaking behavior (Bicard, 2000; Heins, 1996; McGinnis et al., 1995). Many have summarized guidelines for implementing consequences (Gunter et al., 2002; Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003; Lewis, Hudson, Richter, & Johnson, 2004) and addressed the potential problems regarding students with EBD (Gunter et al., 1993; Gunter et al., 1994; Shores, Gunter, Denny, & Jack, 1993; Sutherland & Singh, 2004). This involved process raises issues and concerns beyond the scope of this particular paper. Briefly, however, one should promote rule-following behavior by reinforcing rule compliance, delivering negative consequences for noncompliance when warranted, and doing both consistently.

### Conclusion

Teachers in any classroom containing students with EBD often find themselves in situations that require classroom management systems. Effective rules play a vital role in their successful implementation. The process for creating effective rules for students with EBD appears to hold little difference from that used in other settings. The rule creation process focuses on the needs of learners in the classroom and pays special attention to wording and number of rules implemented. Effective decisions based on these rule creation questions may help teachers further establish a positive atmosphere for students with EBD. In turn, students may respond with an increase in rule-following behavior, assisting them to fulfill the social and academic demands of a classroom.

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