

# Helping Students Follow Classroom Expectations and Rules with Collaborative Problem Solving

As she shut the front door behind her, Erica felt the knot in her stomach tighten. She had tossed and turned the whole long night, and now, in the chilly morning air, a moist cloud betrayed every anxious exhale. After yesterday's events, she wasn't looking forward to class today.



Still, she tossed her bag, heavy with professional development books and student papers graded the night before, into the passenger seat of her car. Sliding in behind the wheel, she turned the ignition.

"This is *Morning Edition*, I'm Steve Inskeep . . ." The blare of the radio startled her. Well, fine. Maybe a loud radio would drown out the scene replaying over and over in her mind.

*I'm sick of having to remind you every time, Owen! This has been going on since the beginning of the year! Every day!*

Erica winced and tried to focus on a radio story about famine.

*Put the book away, now! And you can forget about recess tomorrow! It's gone!*

Erica switched off the radio and finished her commute in silence, accompanied only by the memory of Owen's hurt, bewildered face.

She hadn't meant to become as frustrated as she did. Now she might have lost the trust of one of her special education students with Asperger's disorder (currently categorized as a part of autism spectrum disorder in the DSM-5)—a child with whom she'd worked particularly hard to develop a good relationship.

Twenty minutes later, in her classroom, Erica was methodically sliding marked papers into her fifth graders' mailboxes. She wrote the morning message on the board

in perfectly slanted cursive. All the while, her mind worked over what had happened the day before.

Every day this school year, at the end of reading class, she'd had to ask Owen multiple times to put his book away and begin his math warm-up problems. Owen loved to read, but he needed extra help

with math. In fact, his Individualized Education Plan (IEP) identified specific math goals he needed to achieve by the end of the year. The time Owen wasted reading during math class wasn't helping him achieve those goals.

Of course, the way she'd reacted yesterday hadn't helped, either. But how else was she supposed to get through to him? She'd tried talking calmly to him in the past, but he just stared at her and the behavior continued.

Erica looked up at the clock. It was only 7:15 a.m., more than an hour before school started. Plenty of time for a quick email asking Dr. Landry, the school psychologist, for some help. As part of his IEP, Owen met with Dr. Landry bi-weekly, so Erica hoped her colleague could offer some tips or strategies.

A few minutes later she was startled by a soft knock on her door. "Hi, Erica," Dr. Landry said, slipping through the heavy classroom door, briefcase in hand. "I just saw your email on my phone and thought I'd swing by before going to my office."

Erica offered Dr. Landry the teacher's chair at a kidney-shaped table. "Thanks, but I know how busy you are. This could have waited."

Dr. Landry smiled. "Really? You're a very resilient teacher, but your email sounded like you might be at the end of your rope. Tell me, what's been going on with Owen?"



Erica dropped into a plastic seat and sighed. “Owen is a great kid. He’s made so much progress this year. His social skills are improving, and he’s really making an effort to try new things. You remember at the beginning of the year when he was fixated on anything and everything to do with the Titanic? He wouldn’t read about anything else. Well, now he’s totally open to other book suggestions. And he’s been really getting into science experiments. So, overall, he’s doing a great job.”

While Erica was talking, Dr. Landry had made a few notes. Now she looked up. “But . . . ?”

“But,” Erica continued, “when it comes time to transition from reading to math, Owen won’t put away whatever book he’s reading. I have to ask him over and over again to get out his math notebook and begin the assignment. Every single day it’s the same thing. Sometimes I think he’s doing it on purpose—just to frustrate me.”

“So what happened yesterday?” Dr. Landry asked.

Erica swallowed back the painful knot in her throat. “Not my finest moment. When he didn’t put the book away after the first reminder, I marched over and yanked it out of his hands. I said I was tired of having to remind him to get started on his math every day. Then I told him he’d have to miss recess today.”

“And how did that work out?” the school psychologist asked with a slight grin.

Erica, who had expected a judgmental frown, felt a hint of relief. “Not great. He totally shut down and didn’t do any math work at all. I think he had some tears in his eyes. And I felt horrible that I had reacted that way. At the end of the day I tried to apologize and explain myself. But he wouldn’t even look at me. He looked upset. Hurt.”

Erica paused a minute, her eyes locked on nothing in particular as she pondered the situation. “The frustrating thing is that once he gets going with the math, he is fine—it’s just those first few minutes that are such a challenge for him. And now me.”

Dr. Landry watched Erica thoughtfully for a moment. “Have you ever heard of Collaborative Problem Solving?”

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s a great approach to use with many kids like Owen, who have underdeveloped problem-solving skills. As a child with a disability, he might have difficulties with flexibility, frustration tolerance, and problem solving. Sometimes these difficulties show up as

challenging behavior in the classroom. In Collaborative Problem Solving we try to understand and listen to his concerns, tell him our adult concerns, and then work collaboratively to arrive at a solution that works for everyone. We use the CPS approach to solve chronic and ongoing problems and also to teach important thinking skills. I think it could help get things back on track. Sound good?”

Eric nodded hesitantly. “You don’t think he’s just dragging his feet because he doesn’t want to do the work and is trying to control the situation? He’s not trying to manipulate me?”

Dr. Landry shook her head. “I support the Collaborative Problem Solving philosophy that ‘kids do well if they can.’ And if they aren’t doing well, adults who care need to figure out what is getting in the way, so we can help.

“I’ve been working with Owen for a while and he and I have a pretty good relationship. What do you think about the three of us meeting later and talking this through together? I could model Collaborative Problem Solving with Owen, so you can see it in action.”

*In Collaborative Problem Solving we try to understand and listen to his concerns, tell him our adult concerns, and then work collaboratively to arrive at a solution that works for everyone.*

Erica felt the knot in her stomach start to unravel. “That sounds perfect.”

Dr. Landry glanced at the schedule on her phone. “I have some open time today during your prep in the morning. How about we get together and go over some Collaborative Problem Solving basics then? We can wait to meet with Owen until later.”

At the end of the school day, Dr. Landry and Erica found Owen reading comic books as he waited for his bus.

“Hi, Owen,” Dr. Landry said cheerfully.

Owen looked up. “Hi.”

“Ms. Madison and I wanted to talk with you for a few minutes about something. Is that all right?”

Owen’s worried eyes shifted from Dr. Landry to Erica and back again. “Am I in trouble?”

“No, you’re not in trouble,” Dr. Landry said, smiling. “We just want to talk about some school things.

“We have a few minutes before your bus gets here—could we go to my office to talk for a little bit?”

“Okay, I guess. But I can’t miss my bus.” Owen stood and checked his watch.

“You won’t miss your bus,” Erica assured him. “We’ll have you back with plenty of time.”

Once in Dr. Landry’s office, Owen made himself comfortable in a beanbag chair. Erica watched as Dr. Landry sat on a chair next to him and said, “Thanks again for talking, Owen, and like I said before, you’re not in trouble. We’re just trying to figure something out. From talking with Ms. Madison, it sounds like it’s not going so well when it’s time to start math in the afternoon after reading class. What’s going on?”

Owen started tapping his fingers along the keys on his wristwatch: Erica knew he liked the beeping sounds they made. For a long time, he stayed quiet. Erica wanted to jump in and offer reasons, or suggestions, or excuses, but Dr. Landry had insisted when they met beforehand that Owen should get as much time as he needed to think and respond. Dr. Landry had explained that Owen was the one who needed practice in articulating his concerns.

After what felt to Erica like an eternity, Owen shrugged and said, “I don’t really like math, but I like to read. So I just keep reading instead of doing math.”

“I feel like I’m starting to understand better,” Dr. Landry said. “Can you tell us more about what it is about math that you don’t like?”

“Well, some of it is okay,” Owen responded. “I just don’t like when it’s time to switch from reading to math. It’s hard to just stop. I don’t want to stop reading, and do the stupid warm-up problems. I just need two minutes to finish the page I’m on.”

Dr. Landry smiled at Erica as if she’d just discovered some new information. Erica leaned in to hear how the next step of the process should go.

“I think I’m starting to understand,” Dr. Landry told Owen. “You love to read, and it’s hard to switch all of a sudden to math, and when that happens it’s important for you to finish at least the last page of your book. Does that sound right?”

Owen nodded, “Yeah. I like to stop at the end of the page so I know where to start next time.”

“I see. Thank you.” Dr. Landry nodded her head. “Ms. Madison and I know how much you love to read, Owen.

Our concern is that we want to make sure you learn math, and if you continue to read, instead of doing math, you might fall behind, which will affect your grades. Also, these times when it doesn’t go so well in the classroom have been a little disruptive—which then affects the other kids and their learning. Does this make sense?”

Owen nodded again. Erica was beginning to understand why Dr. Landry had stressed that this process was *collaborative*. Neither the psychologist nor Owen was dominating the direction of the conversation. Both the psychologist and Owen were emphasizing their *concerns*, and not their *solutions*. They were *collaborating* to solve the problem.

“I wonder if there’s something we can think of to try so that it is easier to switch from reading to math, so

you’re able to learn the math material like the rest of the kids, and things go more smoothly in the classroom. Do you have any ideas?”

Owen pressed his lips together and thought. “Ms. Madison could

remind me a few minutes before we switch to math. Then I could finish my page and be ready.”

Dr. Landry smiled. “Now that’s an idea. Let’s take a look at it. Sounds like it works for you. Ms. Madison, would this idea work for you too?”

Feeling like a killjoy, Erica said, “Well, to be honest, it would be hard to do because usually I’m working with small groups right up until math class and it might be hard . . .”

Dr. Landry turned back to Owen. “Hmm. Okay, this happens. That solution doesn’t work for Ms. Madison. Let’s try again to see if we can think of something else so that it is easier to switch from reading to math, you’re learning the math material like the rest of the kids, and things go more smoothly in the classroom for everyone.”

“Can you think of another idea that might work for you, Ms. Madison, and be doable?”

Owen held up his arm. “I know. I could set an alarm on my watch!” He pressed a few buttons and smiled proudly. “Math starts at 2:30 every day. There, it’s all set for 2:27. I’ll be ready for math at 2:30 in plenty of time.”

“Okay—so what I’m hearing you say, and tell me if I’m wrong, is that you will set your watch to remind yourself to finish the page you are on, and then that will help you switch your focus to math. Is that right?”

“Yes,” said Owen.

**Both the psychologist and Owen were emphasizing their concerns, and not their solutions. They were collaborating to solve the problem.**

“Okay, sounds like this works for you, Owen. Does this idea work for you, Ms. Madison?” Dr. Landry asked.

Erica nodded, somewhat bewildered to learn that Owen seemed so engaged and interested in coming up with a way to solve this problem. Dr. Landry had been right; he really did want to do well, and wasn’t just trying to avoid math.

“Okay. Can I go now? I think my bus will be here soon,” Owen said standing up.

Before Erica and Dr. Landry walked Owen back outside for his bus, the three discussed the solution again

and agreed to meet at the end of the week to see how it was working at addressing everyone’s concerns, and to see if any changes needed to be made.

The next day, Erica was reading with a small group of students. She heard a single, soft beep and looked up at the clock. 2:27. She immediately felt tense. Three minutes later, when she asked the class to get out their math notebooks, she looked at Owen. He had his math book open and had started working on the first problem—with the book he’d been reading on the Giza pyramid amid nowhere in sight.

*This story is part of a series based on the experiences of educators, parents and the staff of Genesee Lake School, a nationally recognized provider of services for students with special needs. GLS is part of ORP, an employee-owned family of companies whose mission is to make a difference in the lives of people with disabilities.*

*This article was written by **Amanda Ronan** and can be found at <http://www.orplibrary.com/posts/helping-students-follow-classroom-expectations-and-rules-with-collaborative-problem-solving>.*