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Nicholas Giarrusso

Engagement as the Key to Education Transformed

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Behind the Curtain: How Great Classrooms Can Create Calm Homes

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Nicholas Giarrusso
Principal
Fork Lane Elementary
Hicksville, New York

Tell me if this situation sounds familiar … It's Back-to-School Night and you're meeting with your child's teacher. As they wax poetic about how well your child is adjusting to the new school year, you're sitting there thinking: Are they talking about the same kid?

Often, a child's classroom behavior can starkly contrast with what families experience at home once the school day ends. This is a common frustration for many families, which makes sense considering how different the school and home environments can be. The answer to why children may function one way at school and another at home often lies, at least in part, in how those environments are structured.

The best classrooms consider all the variables that can help set a student's day up for success. From the moment a child enters the classroom, teachers work to reduce cognitive load (mental effort) and make expectations clear and predictable. By establishing consistent routines and systems, and explicitly teaching those expectations, teachers strive not simply to keep classrooms running smoothly, but to create increasingly independent learners who know what to do, when to do it, and how to do it without relying on constant adult direction.

In this article, we go "behind the curtain" to explore how some of these same classroom strategies can contribute to a calmer home. By bridging the gap between effective school practices and home life, we hope to empower families to build some of the same independence we see in our hallways right in their own living rooms.

The following five domains offer a glimpse into the factors teachers consider when designing their classrooms, along with practical suggestions for applying them at home: Routines, Systems, Responsibility, Signals, and, most importantly, Connections.

Without further ado, let's take a peek behind the curtain.

Domain #1 - Routines: How Predictability Builds Independence

In the world of public education, predictability and consistency breed calm. Walk into almost any well-run classroom and you may not necessarily notice the routines that have long been established, but they are there. In many ways, the best routines are almost invisible.

What Teachers Do

At the start of each new year, teachers exhaust themselves by implementing routines by explicitly teaching students the basics they need to succeed in the classroom. No stone goes unturned. Students learn where to put their backpacks and coats. They learn where their materials are located. They learn how to ask for help. How to interact with their peers. How to transition from reading to math. They learn the process of asking to go to the bathroom. How to work appropriately in a small group. And how to work appropriately independently. Strong teachers do not want to field questions from their class about these topics all day, every day. Instead, they explicitly teach these routines, practice them, and, most importantly, positively reinforce them until everyone knows and understands them (Simonsen et al., 2008).

Why It Works

Routine consistency helps children know what comes next. Rather than waiting for an adult directive, children can self-initiate expected tasks, helping them develop greater independence over time.
Another key part of successful classroom routines is positive reinforcement. Teachers often do this through a practice called behavior-specific praise. Instead of simply saying to a student, "Good job," a teacher might say, "I love how you unpacked your backpack and put everything where it belongs!" Through behavior-specific praise, children better understand exactly what they did well and, most importantly, what they should continue doing (Royer et al., 2019).

The same thinking applies when children do something contrary to what we hope to see. Rather than giving unnecessary attention to a minor undesirable behavior, teachers may use a technique called planned ignoring, briefly withholding attention when it is safe and appropriate. At the same time, they can intentionally draw attention to the behavior they do want to see: "I love how Maria got started cleaning up as soon as the timer went off." Instead of letting the unwanted behavior become the center of attention, the adult shifts the spotlight to the positive behavior they want children to repeat.

How Families Can Adapt It At Home

Let's start by thinking about those things you would like your child to do. Maybe in your home it involves turning off the TV and sitting with the family during dinner. Maybe you have a set time in mind to initiate the evening bath routine. Maybe it's related to the morning routine—getting dressed, doing your hair, brushing your teeth, etc. Either way, start by being specific about what you are trying to accomplish.

One key thing to keep in mind is the enormous benefit of modeling the expected behavior. If the adult is doing it, the child is much more likely to follow suit. If you want your children to take their shoes off when they enter the house, make sure you are taking yours off too. Sometimes the challenge isn't changing the child's behavior; it's changing our own.

As we all know, this is easier said than done. Life always finds a way to get in the way! But being mindful about prioritizing the routines that matter most to your family, and modeling those routines as best you can, goes a long way toward helping them stick. Couple that consistency with some behavior-specific praise when you catch your child doing it right, and now you're cooking with oil!

Domain #2 - Systems: The Environment as the Third Teacher

If routines answer the question "What do I do?" then systems help answer "How do I do it?" Take a walk through my elementary school, Fork Lane, and you would notice some key features in our classrooms. Materials are labeled, books are sorted, supplies have designated locations, and anchor charts are posted to explain key systems. Most importantly, students can access many of the things they need without asking an adult. In other words, the systems teachers put in place allow the environment itself to do some of the teaching (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007).

What Teachers Do

Teachers intentionally organize classrooms so children can navigate them independently.

There may be a designated location for completed work, a Chromebook charging station, or clearly labeled areas for classroom supplies.

The specific system matters less than its … consistency! A child should not need to ask where their worksheet belongs once they complete it. Well-designed systems make expected behavior easier to accomplish. One thing our teachers use regularly at Fork Lane is timers, which can help remove unnecessary back-and-forths from the classroom. As one of my teachers put it recently, "The timer is the referee." If a teacher puts a virtual timer on the SmartBoard and tells the class they will be transitioning in two minutes, the system—not repeated adult prompting—helps manage the transition. This can be especially helpful when students move from a highly preferred activity, such as snack or group work, to something they may be less eager to begin.

Why It Works

Sometimes what looks like a child struggling with responsibility is really a child struggling with an environment that requires too many decisions. Imagine telling twenty-five students to "clean up" a classroom without first establishing where everything belongs. The problem is not necessarily motivation. The problem is that we have given children our desired outcome without giving them a system for achieving it. There is a big difference between "Clean this up" and "Put these materials back where they belong." But the second only works when you've already established where they belong. When the environment provides some of the answers, children become less dependent on adults to provide them.

How Families Can Adapt It at Home

The same principle applies at home. If backpacks routinely end up on the kitchen floor, the solution may not be another reminder to put your backpack away. Maybe the backpack needs a clear home. If devices are constantly missing or uncharged, create a charging station. If getting your child away from a video game and upstairs for a bath becomes a nightly negotiation, perhaps a timer can become the referee in your house too. If getting ready for practice involves a frantic search for cleats, uniforms, or equipment, perhaps those items need one predictable location. Start with the places where frustration happens most often and ask: Could we change the environment, or add a system, so the expected behavior becomes easier? Sometimes the most effective reminder isn't something we say. It is a system that makes the next step non-negotiable and more obvious.

Domain #3 - Responsibility: How Shared Agency Builds Confidence

On my desk in my office, I have a coaster with a quote from the famous golfer Ben Hogan: “I never learned anything from a round I won.” One guiding principle we have at Fork Lane is to encourage our students to make mistakes. Mistakes show us that students are taking risks. Most importantly, mistakes lead to growth. That is why, after we teach children our classroom routines and they understand the systems, we intentionally empower them to take ownership of their learning.

What Teachers Do

Many teachers have their students complete formal classroom jobs, such as passing out worksheets and materials, bringing the lunch order to the main office, or being the “line leader” during hallway transitions. These seemingly small tasks carry a very big purpose. When we create environments where kids can complete tasks successfully, their confidence grows. When we celebrate these small successes, especially those that come from stepping slightly outside their comfort zone, we help build their self-esteem along with their academic and social confidence. The best classrooms, in my opinion, are the ones where mistakes are normalized and students feel comfortable taking risks.

Another thing to consider is providing students with choice. Providing choice doesn't necessarily mean asking yes-or-no questions. We want students to think a little. Teachers may ask students to pick a topic for that day’s small-group discussion or choose a game to play at recess. At home, you might do this by letting your child choose their homework area—maybe even one they designed! Providing children with shared agency and some responsibility helps them develop the confidence to make decisions, take appropriate risks, and increasingly see themselves as capable and independent (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Reeve & Jang, 2006).

Why It Works

As we discussed above, responsibility builds confidence. However, children cannot develop confidence in things adults never allow them to do. Whether at school or at home, it's often faster to complete a task on our own. But efficiency isn't the ultimate goal.

When children contribute, their view of themselves changes. Let’s be honest: kids live in a world where they are almost always being told what to do. Being intentional about providing them with small responsibilities communicates something powerful: I trust you. You are capable. You are a big part of what makes our home or school special. And the more opportunities children have to experience themselves as capable, and successful, the more likely they are to take ownership of their learning in the future.



How Families Can Adapt It at Home

You are likely ahead of the game when it comes to empowering your children with responsibilities at home. Do your kids set the table? Do the dishes? Feed a pet? Put laundry in a hamper? Mow the lawn? Help unload groceries? These are all opportunities to contribute to the family. And these are the types of small things that can contribute to their confidence.

The key is choosing responsibilities children can genuinely own rather than tasks that require an adult to supervise every step. A helpful question might be: What am I currently doing for my child that they are ready to begin doing for themselves? Start small, teach the task (modeling the desired outcome is key), expect that it won't always be done perfectly (normalize mistakes!), and gradually step back.

Also, offer choices whenever you can. Maybe, within your discretion, your child picks out two outfits for school the next day, has a say in dinner choices, or chooses what you watch as a family before bedtime.

Creating pathways in your home for your child to feel empowered, earn small wins, and have a voice in the household will help them build the confidence to make decisions, take responsibility, and increasingly see themselves as capable contributors in other areas of their lives.

Domain #4 - Signals: Shifting Transitions From Command to Cue

Even with great routines and systems, transitions are often the trickiest part of the school day. Ever try getting your child to stop playing video games to come have dinner? We experience those same challenges in the classroom. Children become absorbed in what they are doing, especially when it's a desirable activity.

Yet school demands numerous transitions from preferred to non-preferred activities every day. Teachers and parents both know this well. That is why classrooms rely heavily on a very important strategy: the cue.

What Teachers Do

“Stop, look, listen!”

“If you can hear me, touch your head, touch your shoulders, clap your hands twice.”

A timer goes off. A teacher quietly raises a hand. A chime sounds. A countdown clock ticks down on the Smartboard. Music starts playing, signaling cleanup time. The number of non-verbal signals teachers use to manage the many transitions in a school day is endless. And teachers prepare for these transitions well before they happen: “When the timer goes off, we are going to clean up and meet at the carpet.” The signal softens the transition and gives students something to respond to besides repeated adult directives.

Why It Works

A cue differs from a command. A command can quickly become personal: I told you to turn it off. I already asked you twice. Why aren't you getting ready? What began as a simple transition can become a negotiation—or worse, a battle.

A neutral cue changes that dynamic. Remember the term from earlier in this article: The timer is the referee? The timer isn't angry. The five-minute warning isn't frustrating. The signal simply communicates: Something is about to change.

It also frontloads the forthcoming expectation and lets the child start preparing for the pivot before the transition actually happens. And just think about it: Who likes sharp, abrupt transitions? None of us, really. This is why softening transitions is a vital strategy that teachers use to create calmer, more predictable classrooms.

How Families Can Adapt It at Home

Think about the transitions that regularly create tension at home. In my house (I have a four-year-old and a one-year-old), it is often turning the TV off and transitioning to the dining room table for dinner – not running back and forth between the living room and dining room!

In my home, we stopped verbally telling our son that dinner was ready as we placed it on the table, expecting him to immediately turn off the TV (preferred activity) and join us at the dinner table (non-preferred activity). Now we say, “I'm setting the timer for five minutes. When it goes off, the TV goes off and we’re eating dinner.”

Now my son knows what is coming. This does not mean he always loves it when the TV goes off, but the timer has become the referee. Has it eliminated every protest? No, lol. But it has helped create a routine and greatly soften the transition. Sometimes a simple cue allows us to move from “because I said so” to “we both knew this was coming.”

Domain #5 - Connections: Why Relationships Matter Most

At Fork Lane, our number one priority for the 2026-27 school year is to develop 'Emotionally Intelligent' classrooms. What do we mean by that? An emotionally intelligent classroom is one where children learn to understand what they are feeling, why they are feeling it, and how to manage those big and small emotions in a healthy and productive way.

The prerequisite for that kind of work is building strong relationships. Connection belongs at the center of all we do, both in the classroom and at home (Roorda et al., 2011). There's an old saying in education: "Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Another saying is, "Connection eats curriculum for breakfast." These quotes have long resonated with me because they illustrate that the first order of work in any great classroom is to lean into your students and build the best relationships you can. That is the ultimate gateway to everything we've discussed in this article.

What Teachers Do

The best teachers are emotional scientists. They create multiple ways to "check-in" with their students. Sometimes formally, through morning meetings, class discussions, or restorative circles. Other times it happens in the smallest moments: a conversation at the classroom door, noticing that a student seems quieter than usual, asking about last night's soccer game, or celebrating a recent classroom success.

Teachers also notice when a kid is "off" and create opportunities to find out why. If routines, systems, signals and responsibilities create predictability, that predictability creates trust. But it's what you do with that trust that matters most.

Why It Works

Connection tells a child something that no routine, system, signal or responsibility ever can: *I see you. You matter in this classroom. And I'm your number one fan.*

It also helps adults better understand what may be underlying a child's behavior. Sometimes a child struggling with a routine doesn't need another reminder. They need help. Sometimes the child resisting a transition is trying to avoid what comes next. And we simply need to listen. The structure outlined in this article creates security. Connection gives that structure a place to flourish and make real meaningful impacts with your students.

How Families Can Adapt It at Home

For families, this may be the simplest strategy in the article. But there are still ways to make daily conversations even more meaningful. We all ask the basic, generic questions: "How was school today?" And we've all gotten that basic, generic answer: "Good". Try asking something that invites a little more reflection: "What made you laugh today?", "What was something you were proud of?", "What was hard today?", "How did you adjust to that?", "Who did you spend time with?", "Did anything surprise you?" I think of these types of questions all the time and keep them logged in my iPhone notes. A quick check of that list gives me the mental spark I need to make the next conversation with my son even more insightful and meaningful.

Not every question will lead to a meaningful conversation, and it doesn't need to. The goal isn't to conduct a nightly interview. It is to create regular opportunities for children to know that we are interested in their world. And perhaps that is the most important lesson we can take from behind the curtain. Children need structure, but they also need grace. They need expectations, but they also need to feel heard. They need opportunities to become independent while knowing that the adults around them remain available when they need us. The routines, systems, responsibilities, and signals create the framework. Connection is what binds it all together.



Conclusion

In closing, I hope you enjoyed this peek behind the curtain at some of the factors that contribute to a well-functioning classroom. If I leave you with one final thought, it is this: consistency is key. One of my teachers, Randi Feinberg, put it best when she said, "Without consistency, none of this is possible. I compare it to climbing a mountain—you hit a loose rock and fall down. It's the same with running a classroom. When you're inconsistent, you fall down the mountain and need to start over."

The same is true at home. Routines, systems, responsibilities, and signals only become effective when children know they can count on them. That doesn't mean getting it right every day; it means being predictable enough that children know what to expect and what is expected of them.

As you close the curtain on this article and return to the wonderfully imperfect work of raising children, I wish you much success in creating a home filled with calm, consistency, support, and, most importantly, love.

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Dr. Nick Giarrusso is the principal of Fork Lane Elementary School in Hicksville, New York. Throughout his career, he has had the opportunity to understand children and their needs from a variety of perspectives—as a school psychologist, behavioral specialist, special education administrator, and now elementary school principal. His work has included supporting children with autism and other diverse learning and behavioral needs, partnering closely with families, and helping educators create environments where children can thrive. Dr. Giarrusso earned his doctorate in educational leadership from Manhattanville University in 2024. He is most proud to be a husband and father of two young children, a role that has given him an even greater appreciation for the sometimes complicated space between what we know works with children and what it actually looks like to put those ideas into practice at home.

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