Creating A Positive School Climate

3. CREATING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

This section will
- review the importance of a positive school climate
- discuss the components of a positive school climate
- discuss ways of assisting students in feeling valued and accepted at school

What is a Positive School Climate?

A positive school climate exists when all students feel comfortable, wanted, valued, accepted, and secure in an environment where they can interact with caring people they trust. A positive school climate affects everyone associated with the school – students, staff, parents, and the community. It is the belief system or culture that underlies the day-to-day operation of a school.

Improved school climate is a goal to pursue. Educators need to constantly work toward improving their school climate, culture, and conditions so that student learning is improved.

Environmental or School Climate Surveys

Environmental or school climate surveys (scans or assessments) are often conducted to review the factors in the school or classroom that might influence a student’s overall functioning. The surveys can be conducted at the school or classroom level and involve students, staff, parents, community members, and school administrators.

The data collected should be used to begin a dialogue among the school’s stakeholders for the purpose of moving towards meaningful change.

Formal Assessments

Formal assessments can be conducted using a tool that measures a number of climate components. Examples of school climate assessment tools include

- The School Climate Survey (School Development Program – Yale)
- The NASSP School Climate Survey (National Association of Secondary School Principals)

Informal Assessments

Informal assessments are usually conducted within a school using informal checklists administered by school staff members. Please see the Support Materials section at the end of this section.

― Philosophy of Inclusion — Manitoba Education, Training and Youth

“...a way of thinking and acting that allows individuals to feel accepted, valued and safe.”

For additional information on a positive school climate, please see Towards Inclusion: From Challenges to Possibilities: Planning for Behaviour (Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2001).
A Closer Look at a Positive School Climate

In the “Close Up” section below, we will visit a Grade 3 classroom that has made a variety of adjustments to accommodate a student (Sandy) who has a diagnosis of ARND. The teacher has been able to create a positive school climate for Sandy by changing the physical environment, the social/emotional environment, and the learning environment.

Sandy's Classroom Space: As we enter the classroom, we notice that the room is typical of a Grade 3 classroom except that near the front of the class by the teacher's desk there is a student desk and carrel labelled “student office.” Nearby, two containers hold the school supplies and books necessary for Sandy to use. The desk is located in a low-traffic area with good lighting. The student office is used as a quiet area where Sandy (and occasionally other students) go to work quietly. All visual distractions have been removed from the office and from the area around Sandy’s desk. The textbooks, notebooks, and file folders for assignments are colour coded (e.g., blue for math, gray for language arts). School supplies have been placed in boxes with labels and pictures so that Sandy will always remember what is in each box. Around the desk, Sandy’s personal space has been marked with masking tape. Other students are asked not to enter this area. The area has a picture timetable taped to the wall that shows pictorially what activities will occur each day of the school cycle. One of the larger supply boxes has been designated for special equipment – for Sandy this includes a calculator, a tape recorder with earphones, and a timer.

Sandy’s Social/Emotional Supports: Sandy’s teacher is aware of the social/emotional needs of her students. At the beginning of the year, she established the classroom as a safe and respectful place for all students.

The teacher had the class participate in discussions, role playing activities, and other activities that focused on feelings and individual differences. For some activities, the teacher assigns a peer helper or classroom “buddy” to help Sandy. For one class period each morning, plus the lunch hour, a classroom educational assistant helps Sandy. Sandy has a noticeable love of music and the teacher has arranged for her to participate in the school choir. This strength has been identified and mentioned to her parents and other teachers. A behavioural plan has been developed for Sandy by the teacher with input from Sandy’s parents and the school counsellor. When a behavioural problem is developing in the classroom, the teacher asks Sandy to move to her “office area” for quiet time. The teacher handles it in a quiet yet assertive manner and does not argue with Sandy. When Sandy...
leaves the office area, the teacher quietly acknowledges the way in which she handled the move to the office. Sandy is also on a positive consequence system which allows her to listen to music and stories on the tape recorder for work that is completed well. The teacher makes all students feel that they are cared for and belong in the classroom.

**Sandy’s learning program**: Sandy has memory problems and at times cannot follow directions. She is having some difficulties with reading comprehension, vocabulary, and math. The teacher is using an Individual Education Plan which documents the adaptations used with Sandy and the learning outcomes that have been organized into three domains: academic, social, and behavioural. At times the teacher has to be flexible in the amount of work that Sandy can handle at one time. At the same time, the teacher has high expectations for Sandy and involves Sandy in most classroom lessons and activities. She is experimenting with the use of a timer to mark the end of an individual work period. One of the educational assistants in the classroom is working with Sandy on the vocabulary that appears in the regular reader. Other suggestions for working on reading comprehension have been provided by the school’s resource teacher. In addition, Sandy is scheduled for 20 minutes each day on a computer-assisted learning program in the nearby computer room where she is still working on the learning outcomes of the Grade 2 mathematics curriculum. She has been introduced to the use of a calculator and is working on basic operations. The parents are supportive of the school and are working with the teacher on some of the areas that need attention. The school and the parents communicate daily through the use of a communication book.

As the above section notes, the teacher was able to change the environment to meet Sandy’s needs. The teacher had enough knowledge of ARND to realize that Sandy’s needs are different, not wrong. She understands that when Sandy acts out, she is not being stubborn or bad, but rather is being affected by her environment. The teacher realizes that Sandy is not always able to cope with the regular classroom stresses and demands due to her condition.
Other Examples of How the School and Classroom Climate Can Be Changed to Accommodate Students Who Are Alcohol-Affected

The Physical Climate

The physical environment includes all of the factors that can affect students in a physical way (e.g., noise, light, air quality). The examples below illustrate how the environment can be adjusted to meet the needs of the student who is alcohol-affected.

- Research has shown that children who are alcohol-affected perform better in rooms without fluorescent lighting. Natural lighting from windows is preferable. Incandescent or full-spectrum lighting is preferable when natural lighting is not possible.

- Public address systems, alarms, and telephones can startle students who are alcohol-affected. On/off switches may be required. High-quality earphones, sound field systems, or white noise can block out extraneous noise. The staff need to ensure that procedures and routines are put in place for handling fire alarms. Students who are alcohol-affected often find alarms stressful, and the alarm can cause the student to react inappropriately. The staff need to develop a routine to help the student deal with the alarm. The routine needs to be concisely written and supported with visuals. It should be posted in the student’s work area. It may be necessary for the student to practise the procedure on numerous occasions.

- Students who are alcohol-affected can be distracted by activities occurring in the classroom. Room dividers should be used to create visual barriers for learning centres, computer areas, and special work areas. Storage spaces including bookshelves, cupboards, and closets should have doors to reduce the visual clutter in the classroom. A white board should be mounted on the
wall near the student. This board allows staff to post visuals, pictures, and schedules that are important to learners who prefer tactile/visual and kinesthetic strategies. Some students may require special seating when postural instability is an issue.

- Lunch rooms can present unique problems for students who are oversensitive. Students can react to noise and/or smells in the lunch room. Lunch room equipment should be reviewed, and consideration should be given to providing separate eating areas for students who need them.

- When decorating rooms that will be used by students who are alcohol-affected, muted colours such as pink, blue, green, or beige should be used. Ceilings should be without patterns, and flooring should be neutral in colour without a pattern.

**Sensory Issues**

Students who are alcohol-affected often experience difficulties in processing the different sensory information they receive. Sensory information is received from all of the different sensory modalities (touch, hearing, movement, smell, and taste).

For most individuals, the processing of sensory information is automatic. Most individuals can screen, filter, and selectively attend to different sensory information. However, children who are alcohol-affected often have difficulty with these processes. They may be over-responsive to some forms of sensory input and under-responsive to others. They may become overloaded by the sensory information they receive and, as a result, are unable to organize their behaviour.

**Touch**

Children who are alcohol-affected may experience

- a fight-or-flight response to some forms of touch (over-sensitivity), particularly unexpected light touches. This may result in the student engaging in pushing and shoving in response to these kinds of touches (e.g., while standing in line).

- an under-processing of touch (under-sensitivity), combined with a lack of awareness of pain. This could result in a student injuring himself or herself (e.g., hanging on the monkey bars until his or her hands are bleeding, or choking due to reduced awareness of touch in the mouth).

**Noise**

Children who are alcohol-affected may experience

- an inability to screen environmental noise, which may result in the student becoming unfocused and overloaded in a noisy classroom environment, or anxious when the alarm for fire drills is sounded.
Movement
Children who are alcohol-affected may experience

- difficulty focusing when engaging in movement activities, particularly in open spaces. At recess they may run randomly and then be unable to calm down after recess.

- an under-processing of sensory information. They may engage in movement-based activities that place them at risk (e.g., they may jump from the top of a high climbing frame).

- a need to engage in movement-based activities in order to focus. Moving helps them to listen.

- difficulty grading their movements (e.g., they may throw a ball too hard and hit their friend, or break a crayon by pushing too hard when colouring)

Visual
Children who are alcohol-affected may

- become overwhelmed with visual clutter, busy worksheets, boards, overheads, or displays on classroom walls which prevent them from being able to engage in the designated task

Smells and Tastes
Children who are alcohol-affected may experience a reduced tolerance for some smells or tastes. They may have limited food choices because of difficulties with taste.

Sensory checklists may help to identify how a child responds to different forms of sensory input. An occupational therapist can assist in planning activities and interventions for students who are over-sensitive to stimuli.

Children who are alcohol-affected often benefit from sensory based calming strategies. These strategies are unique to each child. Some children benefit from touch activities (feeling objects or manipulating stress balls) while others benefit from the pressure of a weighted vest (vest with weights), enclosed space, or quiet classical music. A sensory checklist is included at the end of this section.

Sensory Problem-Solving
The following examples illustrate how some sensory issues can be addressed. The teacher or paraprofessional needs to be a “detective”– that is, he or she needs to observe, interpret, and think of an intervention that will solve the problem.

Scenario: A student who is alcohol-affected is constantly hitting, pushing, and kicking while standing in line waiting for entry to school.

Problem: The student is over-sensitive to accidental touches while in line.

For additional information on sensory information, see "Reframing Perceptions" in Living and Working with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/Effects (Schwab, Dorothy, 1999).
**Possible Solutions:** Student is put in front or back of line, the vice-principal allows the student to enter the school without getting in line, the student enters the school earlier, or a peer helper assists the student.

**Scenario:** A student with pFAS becomes distracted and disengaged while sitting beside a bulletin board with samples of classroom art work adjacent to the student’s desk.

**Problem:** The student is becoming over-stimulated by visual inputs.

**Possible solutions:** Stimuli are removed from the area immediately adjacent to the student’s desk. The teacher obtains a sheet that has velcro strips on the edges. This is used to cover the bulletin board at those times when the student is becoming over-stimulated, and/or the student is moved to an area with less stimuli.

**Scenario:** A student who is alcohol-affected becomes hyperactive in a lunch room with 30 or more students.

**Problem:** The student becomes over-stimulated by the noise and the smells of the lunch room.

**Possible solutions:** Small group lunch room, use of quiet background music or use earplugs during lunch hour (try at home first).

**Scenario:** A student with FAS runs randomly at recess and bumps into other children.

**Problem:** Open spaces are disorienting to the student.

**Possible solutions:** Develop a recess plan (who, what, where to play at recess), suggest play areas and activities with clear boundaries, or adjust the recess time.

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**How Does Your Engine Run?: The Alert Program for Self-Regulation**

(Williams, Mary Sue, and Sherry Schellenberg, 1996).

The purpose of the program is to assist students, teachers, parents, and therapists in identifying levels of alertness and effective sensorimotor strategies. The program uses the analogy of an automobile engine to introduce the concept of self-regulation to students.

“If your body is like a car engine, sometimes it runs on high, sometimes it runs on low and sometimes it runs just right.”

The program also helps individuals understand the basics of sensory integration.

The program consists of three main components. 1) helping the child identify his or her level of alertness, 2) exploring the five different sensorimotor tools (tools for eyes, ears, body, hands, and mouth, and 3) increasing independence to use the effective tools and self-regulate throughout the day.

For more information, see [www.alertprogram.com](http://www.alertprogram.com)
The Social-Emotional Climate

The social/emotional environment includes all of the factors that can affect how the child interacts with others (e.g., respect for all, clear expectations, safe and caring atmosphere). The examples below illustrate how the social/emotional environment can be adjusted for the student who is alcohol-affected.

- Students who are alcohol-affected should be given opportunities to take risks and develop a sense of responsibility. Special school or classroom jobs for the alcohol-affected student can be very beneficial.
- The behaviour of children who are alcohol-affected can present challenges for all staff. Despite these challenges, staff need to react to behaviour in a positive manner with a clear understanding of why the student is behaving in a certain manner.
- Children who are alcohol-affected may require different approaches to behaviour management. The staff of the school need to explain the reasons for these differences to the other students.
- The staff of the school can offer training to students in disability awareness and empathy for others. A variety of programs are available for this type of classroom instruction.
- The teacher establishes an atmosphere that respects all differences in individuals. Issues such as name calling or bullying are dealt with immediately.

The Learning Climate

The learning environment includes all of the factors that can affect the learning in the classroom (e.g., method of presentation, involvement of students, materials, and resources).

The examples below illustrate how the learning environment can be adjusted for the student who is alcohol-affected.

- Lessons for the alcohol-affected student need to consider learning styles. Students require activities that are concrete, hands-on, and visual.
- Children who are alcohol-affected need to be carefully prepared for all transitions. This can be accomplished by pre-teaching, reviewing routines, and using social stories and visual cues.
- Teachers need to develop and teach routines for as many classroom activities as possible (e.g., completing assignments, entering the room, asking for assistance).
- Teachers should use a variety of techniques to involve the alcohol-affected child in the classroom activities (e.g., student buddies, student helpers).
What Can a School Do to Make Students Feel They Belong?

A key to student success is to ensure that all students have opportunities to feel capable, connected, and that they are contributing members of the school. Students need to be encouraged to become actively involved in their school and classroom. Sometimes it becomes necessary for the staff to take steps to ensure the school and classroom are inviting and welcoming for students who are alcohol-affected. The following section provides some suggestions regarding the development of a menu of positive strategies for helping students belong.

Circle of Friends

The Circle of Friends ensures that supports and friends are in place for a student who is alcohol-affected. The circles are a way of thoughtfully building supports and helping the student feel more connected to the school and community. The Circle of Friends includes the four circles shown in the diagram below.

Fourth circle/outer circle – Circle of Exchange: people the student likes and counts on for support (e.g., doctor, teacher, therapist, educational assistant, store employee)

Third circle – Circle of Participation: groups of people with whom the student enjoys spending time (e.g., soccer team, scouts, Special Olympics team, classmate)

Second circle – Circle of Friendship: people who are close friends to the student (e.g., some neighbours, some classmates)

First circle/inner circle – Circle of Intimacy: people in the student’s life who are closest to them (e.g., family members, best friends)

Teachers can conduct an activity with students in which they compare their “Circle of Friends” with the circle of a student who is alcohol-affected. This activity can demonstrate how each child is different (and that many of us take friendships for granted). By going through this process, it is hoped that friendships will develop for the student who is alcohol-affected.

A strong circle of support needs to work collaboratively to support the child. All parts of the circle need to share information, plan together, and present a coordinated effort to meet the child’s many needs.

**Mentoring Programs**

Several schools have developed effective mentoring programs in which individuals from the school or community spend quality time with a student (or students) identified by the school. The mentor meets with the identified student on a regular basis and is committed to sharing life experiences with him or her. This one-on-one contact can be very helpful for a student who is alcohol-affected. In these situations, the adult who will provide the mentorship will need to prepare prior to starting the individual meetings.

**Teacher Advisor Programs**

Many schools have adopted a teacher advisor program. They assign each student to a teacher advisor who acts as a support and personal advisor. The advisor tries to get to know the student on a personal level, assist him or her with solving problems, and provide advocacy and advice as required. In addition, the student becomes part of an advisory group that meets regularly to discuss items of general concern. Issues discussed will vary depending on the grade level. The sessions may use packaged programs (e.g., Lions-Quest, FOCUS, Study Skills) or focus on discussion topics identified by the students (e.g., career options).

**Peer Helper Programs**

Many schools develop programs in which some students are identified to assist other students. There are many variations on the format these programs can take. They can involve

- peer tutoring programs (in Middle and Senior Years schools)
- peer reading programs (e.g., a Grade 5 student providing reading assistance to a Grade 1 or Grade 2 student)
- programs designed to help students develop friendships
- peer helper program: a Senior Years program designed to help identify and assist students experiencing personal difficulties
- buddy program: a program in which a teacher pairs a student who needs assistance with a more proficient student to work on particular assignments
Creating A Positive School Climate

Welcoming/Greeting Programs
Greeting programs range from being informal (e.g., a teacher greeting every student at the classroom door) to being school-wide (e.g., teachers and administrators assigned to greet students at the front door of the school). A key component in these programs is that teachers greet students by name and make a personal comment to each student as he or she enters the school or classroom. A quick “temperature check” is also a positive feature of this program.

Newcomers’ Clubs
Newcomers’ clubs are established to ensure that new students are made to feel welcomed and are involved in school activities.

Extracurricular Programs
Students who are involved in extracurricular activities usually enjoy school more and do better in school than those who are not involved. Note that some students will need to be prepared for or supported during these activities in order to enjoy success. This might include extra practice, pre-teaching, direction, and peer support. If a coach or drama director is from outside the school staff, it is important that he or she be prepared when a student who is alcohol-affected will be part of the group or activity.

Creating Positive Experiences (school helpers)
For some students, the school will need to develop connections and find ways for the student to be seen as capable. This can be arranged by providing opportunities for success around the school. The student might be involved in assisting in the office, helping the caretaker, assisting with snack time, or helping the classroom teacher. This type of activity can benefit students who are alcohol-affected because it provides a positive way to be recognized by the school staff.

School-Wide Projects
For struggling learners, schools might need to develop an activity or project that will involve them meaningfully. This activity should help them to take on responsibility and experience success. An example of such a program has been developed in a Winnipeg elementary school, where Grade 5 and Grade 6 students at-risk helped to teach students in Grades 1-4 to make holiday craft projects. Another example might be having a group of students who are at-risk take on the responsibility of organizing a school project fair.

Elder Programs
Some schools use the services of a community elder. The elder spends time in the school working with individual or small groups of students. The role of the elder is to teach Aboriginal beliefs, traditions, and culture.
It is clear that a positive school and classroom environment can have a major effect on the achievement and behaviour of students. It takes a concerted effort to create a school or classroom that is conducive to learning. It is particularly important to search for ways to help students who are alcohol-affected feel welcomed and comfortable in the school. Awareness of, and accommodation to, sensory issues is important in working with students who are alcohol-affected.

Creating a positive school climate requires the working together of the community, school teachers, parents, and students. It also requires a major shift in thinking.
Section 3 Support Materials

- Environmental Checklist
- Sensory Screening Checklist
Environmental Checklist*
Proactive Classroom Model

The amount of stimulus in the physical environment is essential to any discussion regarding an appropriate intervention plan for a child with attention problems. The following conditions signify a beneficial or excellent physical environment. Moving toward providing these environmental conditions will assist those with attention problems.

Read the following checklist and think about your work setting. Place a check mark next to those describing an environmental condition that you are willing to strive toward:

- Stimulus in classroom is not overwhelming. Decorations/displays on walls, hanging from ceiling, on the closets, etc. are nonexistent or minimal at most.
- Shelves are closed with doors or drapes and are kept tidy. The covers (doors or drapes) are a plain, non-patterned, soft-coloured material.
- A storage area is available enabling teachers to remove equipment and reduce stimuli.
- Children have experiences working individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Their desks or tables provide them with opportunities to be by themselves in a protected area of the room.
- Colour of the walls, cupboards, desks, shelves, etc. is not bright. There are few colours. The colours are soft and soothing.
- Bulletin boards are not decorated with brightly coloured figures.
- Students with attention problems sit in the optimum location with the least distractions.
- Major traffic areas in the classroom do not have students with attention problems sitting next to them (pencil sharpener, door, bathroom, sink, teacher's desk, etc.) The traffic areas are clearly defined.
- There are areas in the classroom that are private, secluded, and free of stimulus where children are free to go to work, think, calm down, etc.

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The noise level in the room is low: background noise is minimized or removed. There is quiet talking and times of silence. Occasionally soft, soothing music is playing.

Interruptions are minimized or avoided during the school day.

The intercom is rarely used.

The lighting in the room does not cause a glare. It does not hum, nor does it flicker.

Disturbing sounds in the classroom are tracked down and removed (heater, pipes, slamming doors, et cetera).

Furniture is used to delineate work / play areas.

Areas and materials are labeled with both words and pictures, and these are placed at the eye level of the children.

The daily schedule (in words and pictures) is clearly visible in the classroom.

The classroom rules are posted, and they are listed in positive terms.

Children have a way to store their belongings neatly and in an organized fashion.

Children do not have to go from room to room during the day.

Children have a simple routine for preparing to go out for recess and for returning from recess.

There are simple routines for going to lunch in the building.

The rules in the lunchroom are clear and simple.

Materials in the classroom are safe and well-maintained.

People do not walk in and out of the classroom continually during the day.

The primary adults in the classroom are consistent in being at school and with the children.

The class avoids disruptions of the daily schedule, including many assemblies, field trips, and special events.
## Sensory Screening Checklist*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vestibular System</th>
<th>Tactile System</th>
<th>Proprioceptive System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does your child:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Appear fearful of playground equipment or carnival rides</td>
<td>✗ Avoid touch or contact</td>
<td>✗ Exert too much or not enough pressure when handling objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Become sick easily in cars, elevators, rides</td>
<td>✗ Dislike and avoid messy play</td>
<td>✗ Assume body positions necessary to perform different tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Appear fearful of heights or stair climbing</td>
<td>✗ Appear irritated by certain clothing or food textures</td>
<td>✗ Enjoy rough and tumble play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Avoid balancing activities</td>
<td>✗ Appear irritated when someone is in close proximity</td>
<td>✗ Seek deep pressure by squeezing between furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Seek fast moving activities</td>
<td>✗ Often appear very active or fidgety</td>
<td>✗ Relax when given firm messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Avoid participation in sports or active games</td>
<td>✗ Have difficulty manipulating small objects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Seem oblivious to risks of heights and moving equipment</td>
<td>✗ Use their hands to explore objects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Engage in frequent spinning, jumping, bouncing, running</td>
<td>✗ Mouth objects</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual System</th>
<th>Auditory System</th>
<th>Olfactory (smell) and Gustatory (taste) Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does your child:</td>
<td>Does your child:</td>
<td>Does your child:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Appear uncomfortable in strong sunlight</td>
<td>✗ Become upset with loud or unexpected noises</td>
<td>✗ Dislike strong smells or tastes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Appear sensitive to changes in lighting</td>
<td>✗ Hum or sing to screen out unwanted noise</td>
<td>✗ Crave strong smells or tastes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Turn away from television or computer screens</td>
<td>✗ Respond to voices</td>
<td>✗ Smear their face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Focus on shadows, reflections, spinning objects</td>
<td></td>
<td>✗ Eat non-edible foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Have difficulty scanning the environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗ Respond when new people enter a room</td>
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</tbody>
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