THE CLASS MEETING

BY CHIP DELORENZO, M.ED. AND JANE NELSEN, ED.D.

The *Class Meeting* is a time where children come together to help each other solve problems. Many classrooms use morning meetings, circle or community meetings to discuss issues in the classroom. However, most of these meetings are teacher generated, meaning that the teacher usually chooses the topics and uses the meeting to discuss and teach children about these topics. The *Class Meeting* is designed to be student generated and student lead. The meetings main objective is to solve problems through discussion and group brainstorming. The children create the agenda by putting their concerns on the agenda. During the class meeting, the children discuss the problems openly and brainstorm solutions for the problem. Through this process students learn from the inside out. The Latin root of the word education is educare, which means to "to draw forth." When adults "teach" by "drawing forth," students feel capable, belonging and significance, and more motivated to follow the solutions they help create. The *Class Meeting* is a safe place to solve problems because the focus of the meeting is on taking responsibility and solving problems: children are never in trouble, never receive consequences and always focus on solutions!

Class Meetings are held at least three times per week, and last about 20-25 minutes for elementary and middle school aged children. The meetings are held, even if there is nothing on the agenda. This insures the routine is maintained, and children know that if they do have a problem the time and space is set aside to solve it. Agenda items are chosen in order that they were added to the agenda. Many classrooms use an "agenda box" rather than a "agenda list" so that the privacy of the child adding an agenda item is maintained. When a child has a problem that they want help with they add it to the agenda. Teachers may add problems to the agenda box as well.

Positive Discipline Class Meetings provide an opportunity for students to learn valuable social and life skills for good character:

- Listening skills
- Brainstorming skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Mutual respect
- The value of cooling off before solving a problem. (Problems are put on the class meeting agenda, so a cooling off period takes place before focusing on solutions to the challenge.)
- Concern for others
- Cooperation
- Accountability in a safe environment. (People don't worry about admitting mistakes when they know they will be supported to find solutions instead of experiencing blame, shame, or pain.)
- How to choose solutions that are respectful to everyone concerned
- Social interest
- That mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn

Types of Problems Solved in a Class Meeting

1. Individual problems – e.g. having trouble completing work, getting distracted, getting to school on time, etc.

2. Community problems – e.g. classroom is too messy, people aren't doing their classroom jobs, work time is too noisy, people aren't putting their work back, etc.
3. Interpersonal problems - e.g. problems that persist after using individual conflict resolution, ongoing dynamics (sometimes over years), problems that involve more than two people, etc.
4. Ideas or plans – e.g. let's take a field trip to Jamestown to study the colony first hand, let's start a fundraiser for the hurricane victims, etc.

Class Meeting Format

1. Compliments and appreciations
2. Follow up on prior solutions
3. Agenda items
    a. Share feelings while others listen
    b. Discuss without fixing
    c. Ask for problem-solving help
4. Positive wrap up (show and tell, future plans, etc.)

Class Meeting Format Explained

1. *Compliments and Appreciations* (5-8 minutes) – The class meeting starts off with a time of recognizing and appreciating one another's contributions, kindnesses and accomplishments. This follows the Adlerian principle of "connection before correction".
    The teacher or student that is leading the meeting will start the compliments by passing an item (such as a talking stick or Kush ball) around the circle so every student has an opportunity to give a compliment, pass, or ask for a compliment. It is effective to have students speak directly to the person that they are giving a compliment or appreciation to vs. speaking about them in the third person. For instance, "Thomas, I wanted to thank you for helping me water the greenhouse this afternoon," or "Laurel, thank you for taking the time to straighten the shelves this afternoon. You saved me a lot of time," or "Congratulations, Quinn, on finishing that research paper. You worked very hard over the last few days."

2. *Follow-Up on Prior Solutions* (2-3 minutes) – This portion of the meeting takes only a few minutes. The meeting leader or meeting secretary reads a problem and solution from a previous meeting. Most classes check back on problems after one week. The meeting lead or secretary then asks if the solution that was chosen has been effective.
    a. If the solution has been effective, then the meeting leader thanks the person or class and moves onto the agenda for the day.
    b. If the solution has not been effective, then the person (or class, if the problem was a community problem)
        i. May select one of the other solutions from the previously brainstormed list.
        ii. May put the problem back on the agenda if the problem requires more discussion

3. *Agenda items (10-15 minutes)* – This portion of the meeting is designated for problem solving. Children or adults may put items on the agenda. Teachers often suggest putting their problems on the class meeting agenda throughout the day or week (this saves an incredible amount of

time for teachers who feel the need to help fix a problem in the moment, and provides the time for children to calm down before they solve their problems).

    a.   *Share problem and feelings* - The meeting leader asks the person who put the problem on the agenda to share their problem and feelings using "I language". "

    b.   *Discuss without fixing or "feedback"* – At this time, the meeting leader asks the person with the problem if they would like feedback and/or solutions. The person with the problem may say, "No, thank you," of may ask for feedback and/or solutions. During feedback, the talking implement is passed around the who circle and children discuss the problem without solving it. The primary purpose of this portion of the process is to:

        i.   *Give validation* – e.g. "Yes, I've been excluded before and it hurts," or "Yes, I've excluded others before."

        ii.   *Take responsibility* – e.g. "I have been leaving my work out during work time," or "I took part in the teasing, too."

            If the purpose of the meeting is to solve problems and no one is "in trouble" you will find that this process happens naturally over time. One way to help this along is to ask for a raise of hands, prior to asking for feedback, "Has anyone here ever _____? Has anyone ever _____." - e.g. "Has anyone here ever been teased?" "Has anyone ever done some teasing?"

        iii.   *Identify the root of the problem* – e.g. "I think people aren't' finishing their work because there is too much to do," or "James, you have really been doing a lot of teasing. I think Mara may have uninvited you to her birthday party because her feelings were hurt."

    c.   *Solutions* – This part of the agenda involves the children brainstorming solutions and then evaluating them based on pre-agreed upon criteria.

        i.   *Brainstorming* - The meeting leader asks for possible solutions, and everyone is encouraged to participate. To keep the process fluid and the time to a reasonable time, teachers often request that the talking element be passed to someone with their hand up (classroom dynamics should dictate weather the talking element is passed around the circle or given randomly to someone with their hand up). Every idea is important, even if it sounds silly. An idea that someone things is silly might just ignite someone else's imagination and creativity. It is important to let the ideas flow here without comment. Solutions are not evaluated at during brainstorming.

        ii.   *Evaluating Solutions* – After the brainstorming process is complete, the teacher or meeting leader checks the solutions to insure that they meet the following criteria (3 R's and an H**): Reasonable, Related, Respectful and Helpful**. At this point, the solutions that do not meet any one of the above criteria are removed from the list, kindly and respectfully. This process can take the form of a short discussion or simply adult control of error.

Take time for Training
Students need training before they can be effective in Positive Discipline Class Meetings. Without training they may use the "skills" they are used to**:** blame, punishing others, avoiding accountability for fear of receiving punishment. The book, Positive Discipline in Classroom, by Jane Nelsen, Lynn Lott, and H. Stephen Glenn, include activities to help children learn skills in:

Eight Building Blocks for Effective Class Meetings

1. Form a circle.
2. Practice compliments and appreciations.
3. Create an agenda.
4. Develop communication skills.
5. Learn about separate realities (different people see the same thing differently).
6. Recognize the four reasons people do what they do.
7. Practice role-playing and brainstorming.
8. Focus on non-punitive solutions.

Guidelines for Effective Class Meetings

1. Students sit in a circle, and the teacher sits in the circle at the same level if possible.
2. In classes where the students are old enough, students will eventually lead the meeting.
3. The teacher (or student in charge) will start the compliments by passing an item (such as a talking stick or Kush ball) around the circle so every student has an opportunity to give a compliment, pass, or ask for a compliment. It is effective to have Elementary School students use the words, "I would like to compliment _____ for _____. (When students say, "I like the way _____", it is more about them that the other person.) Middle and High School students seem to prefer, "I would like to acknowledge _____", or "I appreciate _____."
4. When students ask to "get" a compliment, they have two or three seconds to choose someone (several students will raise their hands) to give them a compliment. Otherwise it starts looking like a popularity contest.
5. The receiver of a compliment will say, "Thank you."
6. The teacher or student in charge will handle the agenda and read off the next item to be discussed.
7. After the agenda item is read, the student who placed the item on the agenda can choose between, a) sharing feelings while others listen, b) discussion without fixing), or, c) asking for problem-solving help.
8. If the student asks for discussion without fixing, or for problem-solving help, the item will be passed around the circle again for students to discuss without fixing, or to brainstorm for solutions. (Short comments are also allowed.)
9. The teacher refrains from commenting on the students suggestions (except to make sure the student is giving a suggestion. It may be necessary to say, "How could you turn that into a suggestion?"). When the item reaches the teacher, he or she can make a comment or suggestion – but only then.
10. Each suggestion is written in a notebook or on a flip chart.
11. In the beginning, the students may suggest things that sound more like punishment than a solution. If this is the case, the teacher or student in charge can request that they go over each suggestion and delete those that are hurtful, not helpful, or not practical. This should be done at the end of brainstorming, not during.
12. In most cases, the item will go around the circle twice to give children an opportunity to make a suggestion they didn't think of before listening to others. (This doesn't take as long as some fear.)
13. A vote will be taken only if the problem involves the whole class. Otherwise, the student who put the problem on the agenda can choose the suggestion he or she thinks will be most helpful.

Six Reasons Class Meetings Fail

1. Not forming a circle.
2. Not having them regularly (3 to 5 times a week in elementary school) to give students a chance to absorb and practice the skills.
3. Not allowing time for students to learn the eight building blocks.
4. Not passing an item around the circle so every child has a chance to speak or pass.
5. Not allowing child to choose the solution he/she thinks would be the most helpful.
6. Control and expediency are seen as more important than teaching children life skills.

Solving Interpersonal Conflict in the Class Meeting

Using the *Class* Meeting to resolve conflict can be one of the most productive uses of the class meeting. Many teachers will balk at the idea of solving interpersonal conflict during a class meeting. They are worried that children will be embarrassed, get their feelings hurt, or be ganged up upon. These are valid concerns if the safety of the meeting has not been established through mutual respect and experience in problem solving. However, once the safety of the meeting has been established, and the children trust that *Class Meetings* are supportive and solution based (no one is in trouble), there exists a tremendous opportunity for them to learn life-long social skills, empathy and problem solving-skills through resolving interpersonal conflict in the *Class Meeting.*

Some of the problems that are hard to resolve through one on one conflict resolution are:
- Problems that involve more than two people (especially if it's a triad)
- Problems that have been long-term or ongoing (especially with older children who have been together for years)
- Systemic problems that involve the classroom culture or passive participants.
- True bullying. Bullying behavior often includes the use subtle threats and secrecy. Using the class meeting to resolve this problem exposes the behavior respectfully and garners support from bystanders. The *Class Meeting* also allows the bullying child to avoid punitive measures (which tend to drive the behavior underground vs. reduce it), and discover new skills to gain the belonging and significance that they seek.

Solving Interpersonal Conflict in Class Meetings – Do's

- Wait until you feel comfortable with the *Class Meeting* process before solving interpersonal conflicts in the meeting.
- Practice resolving conflict with mock situations as a class before resolving real problems.
- After practicing conflict resolution at the *Class Meeting* talk about what ground rules will keep the meeting safe (teacher should have some definitive input here).
- First person direct communication when sharing the problem – "I language"
- Children who are involved in the problem are given the opportunity to respond right after the person sharing the problem. They must also use first person direct communication share their feelings.
- All children are involved should be asked if they would like feedback and/or solutions. If any of the children does not want feedback and/or solutions, then that should be respected.

- Before feedback and discussion, ask how many of the children have been on each side of a similar problem. This gives immediate validation to children on both sides of the conflict and facilitates a more balanced discussion.
- Start feedback and discussion ½ way around the circle from you. This way, if the discussion is leaning one way or the other, you can give another point of view ½ way through the discussion. This will often instigate more balanced feedback.
- Be sure to facilitate the safety of the meeting by reminding children to give direct feedback to the parties involved, to use "I language", and to keep comments on track and related to the discussion at hand.
- Focus on solutions.
- When it is time to brainstorm solutions, insure that the brainstormed ideas are given to the children involved, and that the solutions are things that they can do or ways they can respond.
- Allow for collective solutions. Solutions can be given to the pair or group of children involved, collectively (e.g. work with other people for a while; discuss how you feel before the problem, etc.). Collective solutions must have buy in from all children involved to be used, and if one of the children would rather not participate in the collective solution that should be respected.

Solving Interpersonal Conflict in Class Meetings – Don'ts
- Use pronouns! Teach the children the importance of using names when discussing the problem. When names are not used, children often engage in gossip after the meeting, as most of the children in a classroom will know who everyone is talking about anyway. Not using names can be much more uncomfortable for a child who is being discussed when everyone knows who the discussion is about. Further, if not everyone knows who is being discussed, then children can begin to feel self-conscious, wondering if the conversation is about them.
- Allow children to talk about each other in the third person.
- Allow consequences or punitive solutions. Use the "3R's and an H" to vet out any inappropriate solutions.
- Interrupt the brainstorming process. Evaluate solutions after the brainstorming process.

FAQ's

1. 3-5 times per week is a lot of time. Can't we just hold one per week and be as effective?

   When class meetings are held only once per week, or less than three times per week, a number of problems occur:

   - There are too many problems to solve, and the meeting either lasts much too long, or problems are not solved in a timely manner.
   - The teacher (or class through a vote) takes control of the agenda and decides which problems are important and which are not, because there is not enough time to solve all the problems. This means that someone has made a judgment on the importance of the problems on the agenda, which can dissuade many children from using the class meeting to resolve problems.
   - Children who are less outgoing will be less likely to put problems on the agenda, and more outgoing children will dominate the once per week meeting.

- Children don't have enough practice to learn and develop the skills necessary to create an effective problem solving format.
- Meetings are rushed in an effort to keep time limits reasonable.

2. Doesn't using names become embarrassing for children?

   Children will use names whether or not you allow for it in the *Class Meeting*. It will happen either during the meeting or after the meeting. The question is, when would you like it to take place? It can happen in a group where you are there to facilitate open communication and respectful interactions, or it can happen on the playground, in a chat room, during the work cycle or in a text message when you are not there. If the children use direct, first person communication, and learn social skills like eye contact and how body language affects communication, it is amazing how respectful and helpful they can be to one another. They just need to be taught and given the chance to practice. And remember, if someone's feelings do get hurt during the class meeting, couldn't that be a subject of discussion at a class meeting?

3. What if it looks like the meeting is going to go longer than 20-25 minutes?

   There is no problem in tabling the discussion until the next meeting. If *Class Meetings* are held 3-5 times per week, routinely, then the children will trust the routine and know the rest of their problem will be discussed at the next meeting. Occasionally (a few times a year) it may be prudent to continue a discussion past the 20-25 minutes because of the nature of the problem. The rule of thumb is to maintain the routine and agreed upon time frame, but don't let the routine become so rigid that important or time sensitive issues don't get the fluid and thorough discussion that they need.

4. How do parents respond to *Class Meetings*?

   They respond very well if they are effective. It is very helpful to hold a parent education session on *Class Meetings* to introduce the approach, and discuss the effectiveness. Consider having the children hold a mock class meeting (especially resolving interpersonal conflict), and video tape it. Use this at the parent session, and then brainstorm with the parents all the skills that children might be learning in participating in such a process. We have seen incredibly difficult situations righted through the participation of the whole class. Parents just want to know that what you are doing works, and that it is helpful to their children.