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RESOURCES

Signals for Quiet

Question: I've read about using a signal to get children's attention and let them know it's time to be quiet. I've tried raising my hand but most of the time, children keep talking. What signal should I use? How do I introduce it? When should I use it?

A: I use two signals, which we practice frequently. When the class is working on something with me, I raise my hand; when they're involved in small group or individual projects, I use an auditory signal, such as a handclap, or I dim the lights. When I first introduce a signal, I model it, using exaggerated gestures. For example, I'll raise my hand and at the same time, hold a finger in front of my closed mouth.

Signals work best if children can respond actively. If I raise my hand, they raise their hands. If I begin a rhythmic handclap, they finish the clapping sequence. This draws their attention away from whatever activity they're involved with and towards me. Then I ask them to cross their hands in front of them, as a reinforcement of the idea that they've stopped what they were doing. I let children know that when I give a signal for quiet it's because I need their attention quickly and that I'll only need their attention for a short period of time. As soon as I've finished with my instructions, I say "melt" and they uncross their hands and return to what they were doing.

I think it's important to wait until all children are quiet and looking at me before I begin to speak. And it's important that I do this every time I use a signal. If I sometimes begin to talk before they're quiet, they don't take the signal seriously. It's also important that I always use a signal to get their attention instead of sometimes raising my voice to say "Quiet down!"

If children have a hard time noticing the signal, we stop and practice again. I'll refer to our classroom rules, saying that the signal for quiet is a way to take care of everyone in the class. I sometimes open up a discussion with the children, asking, "Why do you think some children don't notice the signal? How can you help?" They might say that some children are deep in conversation or concentrating really hard on work. They can help by tapping that child on the shoulder and pointing to the other children's raised hands.

—Jodi McErlane has been a teacher at Hempfield Elementary School in Greenville, Pennsylvania for over 25 years as well as a *Responsive Classroom* certified consulting teacher.

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Signals for Quiet, continued.

A: I use two kinds of signals for quiet: visual and auditory. The visual signal I use is a raised hand. The children are familiar with raising their hand as a way to get my attention so this is easy to teach. The auditory signals are a chime or a rhythmic handclap, which the children echo. I use the auditory signal when the children are involved in work or a game and won't see a raised hand. The auditory signal gets their attention. I follow this with the raised hand to indicate that they need to be quiet.

Introducing the signals for quiet is one of the first things I do at the beginning of the year. On the first day of school, I introduce myself, welcome the children to the classroom, and then teach the visual signal for quiet. I model it, explain when and how we'll use it, and then have them practice. For example, we'll chat with partners as a way to get to know each other. I'll then raise my hand. In response, the children need to raise their hands and stop talking. When the children have done this, I'll give them a wink just as a way to say, "Way to go!" Then I continue with the introductions and a modified Morning Meeting. By introducing this signal first thing, I have a tool to use if children are talking as I introduce Morning Meeting and other classroom routines.

When children seem comfortable with the visual signal, I introduce the chime, letting them know it's OK to be involved in work and not see a visual signal. Again I model and we practice, and we then continue to practice both the visual and auditory signals many times while they are working, standing in line, and making transitions. Each time we practice, I expect them to stop and pay attention. If they don't, we practice again. And I frequently remind them that the signals for quiet are respectful, friendly gestures that we can all use to get the attention of the group and to bring us back to focus.

—Sharon Ketts has taught first, third, and fifth grades, and has been a curriculum resource teacher, a music teacher, and a *Responsive Classroom* certified consulting teacher.

A: I teach recess early in the year and one of the first things I address is the use of signals for quiet. I start by asking the children why they think we need signals for quiet. During the discussion that follows, I make sure that children understand there will be times during a game when we have to talk together as a group or perhaps change something about the game. We also need to know when the game ends.

Signals for Quiet, continued.

The signal for quiet at our school is a raised hand. Because students who are in the middle of a game won't necessarily see a raised hand, I use a combination verbal and hand signal: I'll say "3, 2, 1 hands up" and then raise my hand. The students need to stop what they're doing, raise their hands, and pay attention. Although paying attention is the most important behavior, I like to have students raise their hands because that alerts other students that they need to quiet down. I teach a series of whistle signals to use during active, noisy games. One whistle starts the action, two whistles tells students to stop and look at me, and three whistles says that the game is over and it's time to clean up. I also use verbal commands such as "stop," "go," and "stop and look." With younger students I might use both verbal and whistle commands.

I expect students to pay attention to the signals. I'll wait a short time after giving the signal, perhaps ten silent counts. If students are still talking or not paying attention at that time, I'll say, "Let's practice the signal again." I emphasize the importance of paying attention to the signals by asking what might happen if most students stop a game and a few continue playing. "What happens if I stop a tag game and one person, who has ignored the signal, tags someone?" "Kids will get mad," the students say. "What if we're playing kickball. I blow the whistle to stop the action and most of you turn to look at me but one person ignores the whistle and kicks the ball?" "Someone could get hurt," the students reply. I constantly refer back to the rules we've established: take care of self, others, and the things we use. The signals for quiet are an important tool that lets us do this setting the circle up.

—Mark Farnsworth is a physical education teacher in Connecticut, and has been a presenter at *Responsive Classroom* workshops. Mark sees play as an ideal opportunity to teach children critical social skills.

“Signals are not exclusively for teacher use, but are available for responsible use by students as well”: It is Jonas's turn to share. He brought his gerbil, Harry, who has been waiting in his cage on a table in the corner. When Jonas leaves the [Morning Meeting] circle to get Harry, many conversations commence. Jonas comes back, ready to share, but his classmates continue to chatter. He raises his hand. Across the circle, Amanda notices and raises hers. She gently elbows Leisha, next to her, who is whispering to Damien. Up goes Leisha's hand and she stops in mid-sentence and looks at Jonas. Around the circle hands go up



Signals for Quiet, continued.

and silence spreads. It is simple and efficient, with not a word of scolding or blame issued. His audience is ready and Jonas begins, ‘This is Harry. He’s really a she . . .’”

—from *The Morning Meeting Book*

Five Keys to Success with Signals

1. Choose signals that are easily noticed. Teach and practice signals before expecting children to use them.
2. Always use signals to achieve quiet and expect everyone to honor the signal, including adults who enter your room.
3. Don’t begin talking until you have everyone’s quiet attention.
4. If some children aren’t paying attention, stop and practice the signal again.
5. Remember that the goal is gaining the children’s attention. If everyone is quiet and paying attention, it’s OK for you to start talking—even if a few have not raised their hands or clapped or frozen absolutely still.