

Aidan Lindsay is in his first year of teaching at a small rural school where most students are from lower to middle SES homes. His fourth-grade class has 25 students, with about equal numbers boys and girls. Mr. Lindsay designed his room so that desks are arranged in clusters of three or four, which allows students to work together on some projects. The students seem to like this arrangement. However, some disruptive behaviors have occurred during the first few weeks of the school year.

Mr. Lindsay is seeking the assistance of other fourth-grade teachers, Anna Vargas and Elsa Klendworth. During their lunch break in the teacher's lounge, he asks, "What do the two of you do with a group of three children who do not seem interested in anything but talking with one another and giving silly answers to questions?"

Ms. Klendworth presses him for more information. "What exactly do you ask of your students, and how do they respond?"

"Many times I will show the students how to do something, such as multiplication, on the whiteboard and then ask them to complete worksheets," Mr. Lindsay says. "I inform them that they should not copy the work of others in their group, but I encourage them to ask others for help. This typically works well. I have seen students showing other students how to complete the problems. However, these three children—Billy, Jason, and Megan—all pretend to help each other by talking and pointing to the worksheets, but as I walk past, they obviously are talking about other things and typically end up getting little work done. In addition, their laughing and giggling disrupt the other students, particularly the fourth child in their group, Sara. Of course, given this silly behavior, it is not surprising that Billy, Jason, Megan, and Sara all received low scores on the math quiz I gave last week."

Ms. Vargas asks, "What have you tried to get them back on track?"

"Well, of course, I have repeatedly told them to calm down and get back to work. I have also tried ignoring their laughing and giggling, but they are just too disruptive to the other children around them. So yesterday, I started taking away their recess time when their work is not completed, but I don't know yet how well that is going to work," says Mr. Lindsay.

"I would suggest that you give them extra time to talk with one another *only* if their project is completed," Ms. Vargas suggests.

Ms. Klendworth adds, "Yes, you might even begin by telling them that if they can just be quiet and not disrupt the other children you will give them a few minutes at the end of the period to talk with one another quietly."

Mr. Lindsay leaves the teachers' lounge somewhat skeptical about rewarding students for doing what all the other students already are doing, but he decides to try these suggestions because Ms. Klendworth and Ms. Vargas have been teaching much longer than he has and have been very supportive and helpful over the past several weeks.

As the children enter the classroom after their lunch and recess time, Mr. Lindsay asks them to sit in their seats. On the whiteboard, he demonstrates the day's lesson on multiplication. As the children begin working in their groups, he walks over to the table where Billy, Jason, Megan, and Sara are working.

“I have a new idea,” Mr. Lindsay says. “If the three of you can work quietly for the next 10 minutes while others are also trying to complete their math worksheets, I will give you 3 minutes to talk with one another. You can use quiet voices to help one another, but you need to stay focused on the math work. Sound good?”

The following week at lunch in the teachers’ lounge, Ms. Klendworth asks, “So how is that problem with your group of silly students going?”

“Oh, your suggestions worked like a charm. The three misbehaving students are paying more attention and actually helping one another finish their work so they have time to talk together. However, now the problem is the fourth student in that group, Sara. She has become increasingly frustrated that the other students finish before her. Many times I hear her say, ‘I can’t do it,’ or ‘This is too hard.’ She even went so far as to throw her pencil down on the table and start crying.”

“I have tried to explain to her that she does good work and should ask for help if she needs it, but Sara insists that she is not good at math. Do you have any suggestions?” asks Mr. Lindsay.

“What if you make the 3 minutes contingent on all *four* students completing the assignment?” Ms. Klendworth suggests. “Then the students will be more interested in helping Sara, and Sara will not need to ask for their help.”

“Yes,” Ms. Vargas agrees. “I would also suggest that you take as many opportunities as possible to prove to Sara that she is doing well. You can continue to tell her that she is doing well, but you should also remind her of previous work she has completed well—maybe even start a bulletin board where you can spotlight the students’ work.”