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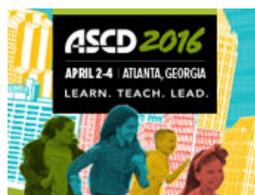
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## Tips for New Teachers

### Teaching Collaborative Skills to a Digital Generation

Lynn Bechtel

In *Grown Up Digital*, Don Tapscott (2008) notes that immersion in a digital environment has yielded students who thrive when teachers use "a student-focused model [of teaching] based on collaboration" (p. 11). Students' widespread use of digital devices to contact friends and access social media leads them to expect—and feel very comfortable with—collaboration.

For savvy teachers, students' interest in connecting with one another can open the door to teaching important collaborative work skills. Positive role-playing offers a great tool for teaching this.

#### Use Positive Role-Playing

Before beginning collaborative work (and, ideally, before using digital media socially), children need to think through and practice positive social responses, starting with face-to-face interaction. For example, if they're working together on a project, how should they listen attentively, disagree respectfully, and give constructive feedback?

We all tend to remember behaviors we practice and see others model. If children act out both negative and positive behaviors, it's often the negative behaviors that stick in their minds more vividly than the positive alternatives. For this reason, in positive role-playing children only act out the constructive choices. Teachers describe a potentially tricky situation, such as sharing and critiquing ideas, and remind students of the goal of positive behavior. The class brainstorms and then dramatizes several solutions.

#### Role-Playing for a Collaborative Project

Here's how a role-playing activity for responding to group members' ideas for a collaborative project might look.

##### 1. Introduce the role-playing activity.

Ms. Johansen gathers the students around her and says, "This afternoon you'll meet in collaborative groups to discuss the proposal drafts you've each written for your piece of the oral history project. How will we respond to one another's ideas?"

"Imagine I'm sitting with my group, and Joey has just read his proposal draft. He's got a good idea but he's a little unclear about how he'll put the idea into action. I'm wondering how to give him helpful feedback."

##### 2. Ask students to suggest ways to provide positive feedback.

Seeing the students' engagement, she continues, "One of our class rules says that we treat each other

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respectfully. Another rule says that we help each other do our best learning. How could I respond to Joey in a way that respects those rules?"

Ms. Johnson pauses briefly and then invites students' ideas: "Take a minute to think of respectful ways I could respond. Give a thumbs-up when you're ready to share an idea."

After a little thinking time, she calls on students and charts their ideas:

"Mention things you liked about his proposal first and then tell him what's not clear to you."

"Say what you want to know more about."

"Ask him what he wants help with."

### 3. Ask students what body language looks like in positive collaboration.

Ms. Johansen then asks students two follow-up questions: "These are great things to think about. Now, what should my voice sound like? And what should my face and body look like?"

Students might respond as follows:

"Have a friendly voice."

"Look at him and look interested."

"Sit facing him."

### 4. Model a positive collaborative interaction.

Ms. Johansen then starts the role-playing. "Let's role-play the first idea on our chart, telling things we like about Joey's proposal first and then telling him what's not clear to us," she says.

Ms. Johansen takes the lead role to ensure that the action remains positive and invites another student to play Joey.

### 5. Have students share their observations.

When the brief role-playing ends, Ms. Johansen asks, "What did you notice about what I said? How about the way I said it? How do you imagine Joey felt?"

Students share their observations.

### 6. Students work together, referring to the posted list of positive collaboration attributes.

To conclude, Ms. Johansen says, "I'll post this list on the wall. When you're in your groups, I'll pay attention to how you're working together and responding to each other. Later, we'll check in on how it went."

## Time Well Spent

Collaborative skills will likely be a big part of life for the generation we're teaching now, and positive role-play activities can bring those skills to life for them in an immediate and practical way. As a result, they're more likely to use positive (hence, productive) solutions when they encounter difficult situations—inside or outside the classroom, in person or in their digital worlds.

## Reference

Tapscott, D. (2008). *Grown up digital*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

[Lynn Bechtel](#) is a senior editor at Northeast Foundation for Children and developer of the Responsive Classroom approach. Her primary responsibilities include project management of Responsive Classroom [professional development kits](#) and workshop materials. She has taught at the college, high school, and middle school levels.

*Source:* For more information about successful role-playing activities, see Chapter 4 of *Solving Thorny Behavior Problems: How Teachers and Students Can Work Together* by Caltha Crowe (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2009).

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