



How To: Improve Classroom Management Through Flexible Rules: The Color Wheel

The posting of classwide rules can help teachers to teach behavioral expectations and prevent problem behaviors (Simonsen et al., 2008). However, a single set of rules lacks flexibility. As students move from large group instruction to cooperative learning groups to less-structured free time (often during the same day and in the same classroom), behavioral expectations shift as well. The teacher who attempts to apply an unchanging set of behavioral rules across so varied a range of activities will be forced to suspend, amend, or ignore certain rules at certain times, creating potential uncertainty and confusion among students (Kirk et al., 2010). For example, the simple rule "To speak, raise hand for teacher permission" is useful in large-group instruction but does not transfer well to discussions in student-led groups.

The Color Wheel is one solution that enforces uniform group expectations for conduct while also responding flexibly to the differing behavioral demands of diverse learning activities. This classwide intervention divides all activities into 3 categories and links each category to a color: green for free time/ low-structure activities; yellow for large- or small-group instruction/independent work; and red for brief transitions between activities. The student learns a short list of behavioral rules for each category and, when given a color cue, can switch quickly from one set of rules to another.

Color Wheel: Steps. Here are the 5 steps to implementing the Color Wheel in the classroom (Fudge et al., 2008; Kirk et al., 2010):

1. *Define behavioral expectations for each color.* The teacher develops a short list of rules summarizing the behavioral expectations for each of the color levels in the Color Wheel: green (free time/ low-structure activities); yellow (large- or small-group instruction/independent work); and red (transitioning between activities). The table on the right provides a starter-set of appropriate behaviors by color condition that the teacher can edit to match the developmental level of a particular classroom.
2. *Create Color rules posters.* The teacher next creates posters to be publicly posted for this intervention. The instructor copies the rules for each color level in large, legible script onto posterboard of a matching color (e.g., green color level rules are copied onto green posterboard, etc.). (See Figure 1 below for an example of Color Wheel posters.)
3. *Create the Color Wheel.* The teacher assembles the Color Wheel, a simple device for alerting students to the current color condition in effect in the classroom. The simplest way to create a Color Wheel is to cut a large disk (12 inches or greater) from white posterboard. The disk is partitioned into thirds with heavy black lines--like a pie divided into 3 large slices. Each of the 3 pie-slices is then colored in with one of the green/yellow/red colors. The teacher then affixes a large posterboard arrow in the center of the circle -- using a brad (paper fastener) to allow the arrow to rotate. (See Figure 1 below for an example of a Color Wheel.)
4. *Train students in the Color Wheel procedures.* The teacher posts the Color Wheel and colored behavior posters in a location visible to all students. The instructor explains the color levels and describes the activities associated with each. Next, the teacher uses the colored posters to review the behavioral expectations associated with each color level. The teacher gives specific descriptions of acceptable behaviors and their boundaries (e.g., "At the

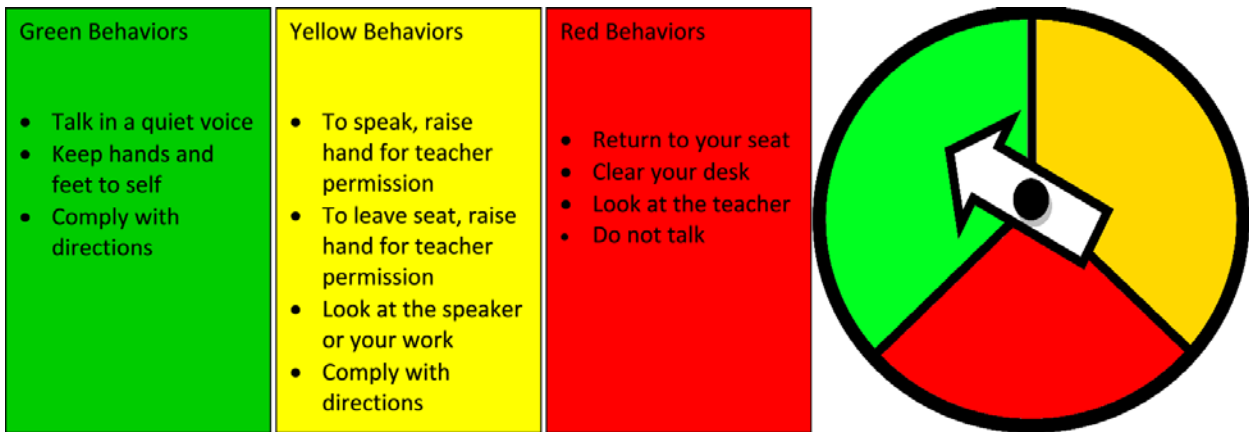
Color Wheel Behaviors: Sample List
Green Condition: Free Time/Low-Structure Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk in a quiet voice • Keep hands and feet to self • Comply with directions
Yellow Condition: Large- or Small-Group Instruction/Independent Work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To speak, raise hand for teacher permission • To leave seat, raise hand for teacher permission • Look at the speaker or your work • Comply with directions
Red Condition: Transitions Between Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return to your seat • Clear your desk • Look at the teacher • Do not talk



red level, when you clear your desks, your materials go into desks, backpacks, and cubbies--you should not stack any materials on the floor.".) The teacher next demonstrates the Color Wheel, showing how the arrow indicator will always point to the color condition currently in effect as a guide to which colored rules poster the students will follow.

5. *Begin the Color Wheel intervention.* The teacher then starts the Color Wheel intervention. To prepare students to adjust quickly to new color conditions, the instructor always gives a 30-second warning when the Color Wheel is about to change. (If students have difficulty with this single reminder, the instructor may want to give both a 2-minute and 30-second warning.) The teacher also regularly praises students for following posted behaviors. For maximum effectiveness, classwide praise should be intermixed with praise to small groups and individuals. Praise should also be 'labeled', clearly describing the behaviors that are praise-worthy (e.g., "This reading group transitioned quickly and quietly to the math lesson. Nice work!").

Figure 1: Sample Posters and Color Wheel



Color Wheel: Additional Considerations. Although the Color Wheel system is fairly easy to implement, teachers should be mindful of these recommendations (Fudge, et al., 2008)

1. *Keep the Color Wheel 'red' periods short.* The red condition of the Color Wheel covers transitions between activities--which should always be brief in duration. Teachers should therefore keep students on the red phase only long enough complete the transition to a new green or yellow activity. Once students are trained to make efficient transitions, 3-5 minutes should be sufficient to move into and out of a red phase.
2. *Do not use the 'red' Color Wheel setting as punishment.* The behavioral expectations for the red (transitions) Color Wheel condition are the most restrictive, as students need to be seated, quiet, and focused on the teacher to learn the details of the upcoming activity. However, teachers should never set the classroom color condition to red simply to punish students for misbehavior. Linking the red condition with punishment raises the possibility that students will fail to comply with the red behavioral rules because they are seen as punitive rather than necessary to support an effective learning environment.

References

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