

# How Directions and Corrections Limit Learning (And What to Do Instead)

**The language we use with students matters.** Constant directions and corrections—even when well-intentioned—can overwhelm students, triggering stress and making them feel controlled or defensive.

Here's the good news: there's a simple formula to shift from telling to engaging. By using **statements + open-ended questions + pauses**, you can create collaborative learning moments that spark curiosity, encourage reflection, and build ownership of learning.

This small shift turns corrections into opportunities for growth, while fostering connection and engagement.

## FORMULA FOR SUCCESS



### **OBSERVE**

Start with a statement that briefly describes what is happening.

### **INQUIRE**

Ask an open-ended question that prompts reflection.

### **PAUSE**

Give the student time to process and respond.

*Using this formula offers numerous advantages for both student outcomes, educator satisfaction, and overall classroom dynamics:*

**1) Encourages Critical Thinking**

Declarative statements combined with inquiry prompt students to assess situations, evaluate options, and make decisions, fostering independence and higher-order thinking.

**2) Promotes Self-Regulation and Ownership**

By inviting students to reflect and choose, this approach supports self-regulation and empowers them to take responsibility for their actions and decisions.

**3) Builds Relationships and Trust**

A collaborative tone conveys respect for students' perspectives, strengthening relationships and creating a foundation of trust and mutual respect.

**4) Reduces Power Struggles**

When students are asked questions or invited to reflect rather than given directives, they're less likely to resist, minimizing conflict and promoting cooperation.

**5) Supports Executive Function Development**

Engaging students in reflection and decision-making activates essential skills like planning, organizing, and problem-solving.

**6) Encourages Curiosity and Engagement**

Inquiry-based language taps into natural curiosity, transforming moments into opportunities for meaningful exploration and active engagement.

**7) Aligns with Inclusive Practices**

This approach values diverse perspectives, making it a supportive and inclusive strategy that helps all students feel seen, heard, and respected.

**8) Enhances Problem-Solving in Social Situations**

Particularly effective during conflicts, this method guides students toward collaborative problem-solving while developing empathy and perspective-taking.

By replacing directives with this simple communication strategy, educators will foster growth across developmental and subject areas, including social skills, participation, emotional regulation, independence, and academics.

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## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THE FORMULA

With practical, age-appropriate examples for early childhood, middle grades, and high school, this handout offers 150 actionable ways to use the formula in everyday interactions.

### 1. BUILDING SOCIAL SKILLS

#### Early Childhood

- "Your friend is building a tower. How can you help them make it taller?"
  - Encourages collaboration and teamwork.
- "I noticed they're playing house over there. What role would you like to play?"
  - Promotes inclusion in peer activities.
- "Your friend looks sad. What do you think we could do to help them feel better?"
  - Builds empathy and kindness.
- "Wow, you both have the same idea! How can you work on it together?"
  - Encourages sharing and cooperation.
- "Everyone is working on a group puzzle. How can your piece help complete it?"
  - Promotes collective effort and problem-solving.

## **Middle Grades**

- "Your classmate has a great idea. How can you build on it?"
  - Encourages listening and contributing to group discussions.
- "Your partner is explaining their thinking. What questions could you ask to learn more?"
  - Builds active listening and curiosity.
- "I see two people working on the poster. How could you join in?"
  - Promotes teamwork and shared responsibilities.
- "Your friend needs a partner for the project. How can you support them?"
  - Fosters helpfulness and inclusion.
- "This game needs a referee. Would you like to take that role?"
  - Encourages leadership and fairness.

## **High School**

- "Your group is brainstorming ideas. What's one way to support each person's input?"
  - Builds collaboration and respect for diverse perspectives.
- "Your friend looks overwhelmed with the assignment. How could you offer help?"
  - Encourages compassion and peer mentoring.
- "Someone in your group hasn't spoken up yet. How can we create space for their ideas?"
  - Promotes equity in participation.
- "Your teammates are deciding roles. How can you help ensure everyone has a fair chance?"
  - Develops negotiation and fairness skills.
- "You're presenting with your group tomorrow. How can you prepare together today?"
  - Encourages effective collaboration and planning.

## 2. SAFETY OR TRANSITIONS

### Early Childhood

- "I see there are lots of cars around us. How can we stay safe?"
  - Encourages children to assess their environment and think about staying safe.
- "It's a hot day, and the ground looks warm. How might we protect our feet?"
  - Prompts young learners to think about adapting to their environment.
- "My tummy is rumbling; I think it's ready for snack time. What do you think your tummy might be hungry for?"
  - Helps children tune into their bodily signals and daily routines.
- "Wow, I see toys still on the floor. What do you think we need to do before snack time?"
  - Invites responsibility and awareness of transitioning between activities.
- "The playground is getting quieter. What might that mean for us?"
  - Encourages children to notice their surroundings and anticipate changes.

### Middle Grades

- "There's a lot of movement in the hall. How can we make sure everyone stays safe?"
  - Fosters awareness of group dynamics during transitions.
- "It's very sunny outside. What might we need to stay comfortable for recess?"
  - Helps students think about preparation and self-care.
- "It looks like we need to clear our desks before moving to the next class. What do you think needs to happen first?"
  - Builds awareness of environmental responsibility.
- "The school bell rang. What do we need to do to get to our next class safely?"
  - Encourages attention to routines and time management.
- "I noticed the hallway is crowded. How can we move through it respectfully and quickly?"
  - Promotes problem-solving in shared spaces.

## High School

- "The parking lot is really full today. How can we be careful walking to our cars?"
  - Encourages situational awareness in older students.
- "It's icy outside. What should we do to avoid slipping on the way to the bus?"
  - Helps students anticipate and mitigate risks.
- "Lunch is almost over. How can we make sure we're ready for our next class?"
  - Prompts time management and preparation.
- "I noticed people are rushing to get their books. What's a good way to avoid collisions?"
  - Encourages mindfulness in crowded areas.
- "The classroom is almost empty. What does that mean about where we need to be next?"
  - Supports transitions through environmental cues.

## 3. GETTING READY OR CLEANING UP

### Early Childhood

- "We have to leave soon. What might we need to do to get ready?"
  - Encourages planning and decision-making.
- "The toys are all over the floor. How can we make cleaning up fun?"
  - Inspires creativity while accomplishing tasks.
- "Your friend is putting on their jacket. How might you get ready too?"
  - Uses peer modeling to inspire action.
- "The art supplies are on the table. What can we do with them next?"
  - Opens the door to creativity and organization.
- "I noticed your shoes are still by the door. What's the next step to get ready?"
  - Promotes independence in routines.

## Middle Grades

- "We need our materials for the next class. What might we need to pack up?"
  - Encourages preparation and responsibility.
- "The group project items are still out. How should we organize them?"
  - Builds teamwork and organizational skills.
- "Your lab partner is already cleaning their station. How can we finish ours?"
  - Promotes peer collaboration and shared responsibilities.
- "What's the best way to pack up so we're ready for the bus?"
  - Teaches effective planning and packing techniques.
- "Our classroom looks messy. What can we do together to make it ready for tomorrow?"
  - Encourages ownership of shared spaces.

## High School

- "We're about to start our group presentation. What do we need to set up first?"
  - Supports project management and preparation.
- "The lab equipment is still on the table. What's our plan for putting it away?"
  - Promotes responsibility and task delegation.
- "It's almost game time. What might we need to pack for practice?"
  - Encourages readiness and organization.
- "The props from our drama performance are scattered. How can we store them?"
  - Develops teamwork in maintaining shared resources.
- "Our meeting is in five minutes. How should we prepare the room?"
  - Builds accountability in managing time and space.

## 4. DURING A CONFLICT BETWEEN STUDENTS

### Early Childhood

- "It looks like you both want the same toy. How can we make sure everyone gets a turn?"
  - Encourages fairness and sharing.
- "Your friend looks upset. How can we help them feel better?"
  - Builds empathy and emotional awareness.
- "There's only one block left. How might we use it together?"
  - Promotes collaboration over competition.
- "It seems like there's not enough room. How can we make space for everyone?"
  - Encourages creative problem-solving.
- "I noticed big feelings. How can we help each other feel calm and safe?"
  - Guides children toward emotional regulation and safety.

### Middle Grades

- "It sounds like there's a disagreement. What's a good way to solve it so everyone is happy?"
  - Promotes conflict resolution skills.
- "You both need the same materials. How can you share them?"
  - Encourages compromise and collaboration.
- "Let's pause. What can we do to make this project work for everyone?"
  - Builds teamwork and inclusion.
- "Someone feels left out. How can we bring them into the game?"
  - Encourages inclusion and empathy.
- "It looks like a misunderstanding. How can we talk it through together?"
  - Supports effective communication and problem-solving.

## High School

- "I hear two different ideas. How can we combine them into one great plan?"
  - Promotes cooperation and synthesis of ideas.
- "This group is feeling stuck. What's a fair solution for everyone?"
  - Encourages critical thinking and fairness.
- "You're both frustrated. What's the best way to move forward?"
  - Builds emotional intelligence and constructive action.
- "One person seems upset. How can we check in with them?"
  - Promotes social awareness and caring behaviors.
- "How can we ensure everyone has a voice in this discussion?"
  - Fosters respect for diverse opinions and teamwork.

## 5. FOSTERING INDEPENDENCE

### Early Childhood

- "You're putting on your shoes all by yourself! What's the next step?"
  - Encourages confidence in self-care routines.
- "You stacked those blocks so high! What will you build next?"
  - Promotes decision-making and creative exploration.
- "You remembered to bring your backpack! What else do you need for school?"
  - Supports responsibility and preparation.
- "Your painting is amazing! How do you want to display it?"
  - Fosters pride and autonomy in choices.
- "You figured out how to solve that puzzle! What other challenge could you try?"
  - Encourages perseverance and self-directed learning.

## Middle Grades

- "You set up the experiment on your own. What's the next step in your lab instructions?"
  - Builds problem-solving and task sequencing.
- "You managed your homework well this week. How can you stay on top of it next week?"
  - Encourages forward-thinking and planning.
- "You've been tracking your own grades. What's one goal you'd like to set for next month?"
  - Supports self-reflection and personal goal-setting.
- "You chose this book for your project. How can you organize your ideas for the report?"
  - Promotes independence in managing assignments.
- "You finished the group task early. What would you like to do with your extra time?"
  - Builds decision-making and time management.

## High School

- "You're preparing for college applications. What's the first thing you need to tackle?"
  - Encourages self-initiative and planning.
- "You designed your science project yourself. What materials will you need to complete it?"
  - Supports resourcefulness and project management.
- "You've been handling your schedule really well. How can you make it even more efficient?"
  - Builds self-regulation and optimization skills.
- "You took responsibility for leading the group discussion. What's your plan for next time?"
  - Encourages leadership and reflection.
- "You've been managing your part-time job and school. How can you balance it even better?"
  - Fosters critical thinking about time and energy management.

## 6. REGULATING EMOTIONS

### Early Childhood

- "I see you're upset. What's one way we can help you feel calmer?"
  - Supports emotional awareness and self-soothing.
- "It looks like you're frustrated with the blocks. What's another way we can build with them?"
  - Encourages problem-solving in moments of frustration.
- "You're laughing so much! How can we share this joy with our friends?"
  - Helps children channel positive emotions constructively.
- "Your face looks worried. What can we do together to feel safe?"
  - Builds emotional regulation and trust.
- "It seems like you're really excited. How can we use that energy to start our next activity?"
  - Redirects high energy positively.

### Middle Grades

- "It sounds like you're upset about the group project. What's one way we can work through it?"
  - Encourages communication and problem-solving.
- "You seem nervous about the test. What's something that could help you feel prepared?"
  - Promotes self-reflection and action.
- "You're feeling overwhelmed. What's one step we can focus on right now?"
  - Supports emotional regulation through breaking tasks into manageable parts.
- "I noticed you're really excited. How can you channel that energy into your presentation?"
  - Builds emotional awareness and focus.
- "You seem disappointed with the results. What's something you could try differently next time?"
  - Encourages resilience and a growth mindset.

## High School

- "You're angry about the grade. What's a constructive way to address it with your teacher?"
  - Builds self-advocacy and emotional regulation.
- "You're really happy about your win! How can we celebrate as a team?"
  - Encourages positive group dynamics.
- "You're feeling stressed about finals. What's one way you can prioritize your study time?"
  - Promotes problem-solving and self-care.
- "You're upset about the group dynamic. How can we address it together?"
  - Encourages teamwork and open communication.
- "You're proud of your work. How can you share it with others to inspire them?"
  - Builds confidence and community.

## 7. ENCOURAGING CURIOSITY AND EXPLORATION

### Early Childhood

- "I wonder what happens when we mix these colors. What do you think?"
  - Sparks curiosity and experimentation.
- "I see a lot of leaves on the ground. What could we do with them?"
  - Encourages creative play and observation.
- "I noticed you're watching the ants. What do you think they're doing?"
  - Builds curiosity about nature.
- "You have a magnifying glass. What do you want to look at more closely?"
  - Promotes exploration and investigation.
- "I heard you ask about the stars. What could we do to learn more about them?"
  - Encourages inquiry and discovery.

## Middle Grades

- "You're asking great questions about the experiment. How could you test your ideas?"
  - Builds scientific curiosity and critical thinking.
- "You're really into this book. What else could you read to learn more about the topic?"
  - Encourages deep exploration of interests.
- "You've drawn a detailed map. What story could you create about this place?"
  - Sparks creativity and imagination.
- "You seem curious about the machine in the workshop. What would you like to learn about it?"
  - Promotes hands-on exploration.
- "You're interested in current events. How can you find reliable sources to learn more?"
  - Encourages informed inquiry

## High School

- "You have a unique idea for the debate. How could you research it further?"
  - Supports independent thinking and exploration.
- "You're fascinated by this historical period. How could you connect it to today?"
  - Encourages critical analysis and synthesis.
- "You're asking great questions about coding. What project could you create to test your skills?"
  - Promotes self-directed learning and experimentation.
- "You're curious about this career path. What's one way to learn more about it?"
  - Builds proactive exploration of future opportunities.
- "You're passionate about this social issue. What action could you take to make a difference?"
  - Encourages curiosity-driven advocacy and leadership.

## 8. WHEN A STUDENT REFUSES

### Early Childhood

- "I see you're not ready to clean up. What could make it easier for you to start?"
  - Encourages the child to express their needs and think of solutions.
- "It seems like you're not ready to join circle time yet. What would help you feel ready?"
  - Builds self-regulation and autonomy.
- "You're still playing with the blocks. What do you think we can do to save your creation for later?"
  - Validates their engagement while preparing them for a transition.
- "It looks like you're having a tough time putting on your shoes. How can I help?"
  - Provides support without imposing a directive.
- "You're holding onto your paintbrush tightly. Is there something you want to share before we move to the next activity?"
  - Encourages communication and emotional awareness.

### Middle Grades

- "I noticed you haven't started yet. What's holding you back?"
  - Opens the door for students to reflect and share obstacles.
- "It seems like you're choosing not to participate right now. How can we make this feel more manageable for you?"
  - Promotes a problem-solving mindset.
- "I see you're sitting out. What can we do to make this activity more comfortable for you?"
  - Encourages the student to suggest adaptations.
- "It looks like you'd rather work independently. How can we balance that with the group's needs?"
  - Helps students consider their preferences alongside group responsibilities.
- "You're staying quiet during the discussion. Is there something you'd like to add when you're ready?"
  - Gives space for input while respecting their pace.

## High School

- "It seems like you're not engaging with the assignment. What's on your mind?"
  - Invites a conversation about potential barriers.
- "You haven't joined the group yet. What would make this activity feel worthwhile for you?"
  - Helps students connect personally to the task.
- "I noticed you're staying behind while the others are presenting. In what way can I support you?"
  - Builds trust and offers individualized support.
- "You're not ready to submit your work yet. What do you need to feel confident?"
  - Promotes self-reflection and agency.
- "I see you're hanging back during the lab. What role would you like to play?"
  - Encourages involvement while honoring their choice.

## 9. ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

### Early Childhood

- "I see everyone getting ready for music time. How might you join in?"
  - Invites decision-making about how to participate.
- "Your friends are dancing. Which dance move would you like to try?"
  - Encourages creativity and engagement.
- "I noticed the paint station is open. What might you like to create there?"
  - Provides an opportunity for self-directed exploration.
- "Everyone is finding their place on the rug for the story. Where would you like to sit?"
  - Fosters a sense of inclusion and choice.
- "I see your friends building with blocks. What could you add to their creation?"
  - Promotes collaborative play and contribution.

## Middle Grades

- "The group is brainstorming ideas. What's one thing you'd like to share?"
  - Encourages students to share without pressure.
- "I see everyone is setting up their experiments. How can we make yours stand out?"
  - Inspires engagement and ownership.
- "Your classmates are choosing parts for the play. Which role would you like to try?"
  - Promotes active involvement and personal choice.
- "The discussion is heating up. How can we make sure your voice is heard?"
  - Empowers quieter students to participate.
- "Everyone is solving the puzzle together. How can your skills help the group?"
  - Highlights their unique contributions to teamwork.

## High School

- "I see your peers are presenting their projects. What's one way you could support them?"
  - Encourages engagement even if not directly participating.
- "The debate team is preparing arguments. Which side resonates most with you?"
  - Invites critical thinking and alignment with personal beliefs.
- "I noticed others are building their models. How might you approach yours?"
  - Encourages personal investment in the task.
- "Your group is collaborating on a solution. What's one thing you can add to their plan?"
  - Supports active teamwork.
- "The class is voting on a topic. How can your opinion make a difference?"
  - Promotes active citizenship and decision-making.

## 10. ACADEMICS

### Early Childhood

- **Math:** "I see we have a group of blocks. How many ways can we arrange them to make a square?"
  - Encourages exploration of spatial reasoning and shapes.
- **Science:** "You're looking at the leaves. What do you notice about their shapes and colors?"
  - Promotes observation and curiosity about nature.
- **Social Studies:** "What kind of house would you like to build? What could you use to make it?"
  - Fosters creativity and connections to real-life experiences.
- **Language Arts:** "You're stacking the blocks really high. How do you feel when the tower wobbles?"
  - Encourages self-awareness and emotional connection to activities.
- **Integrated:** "You're drawing a picture. How could you use numbers or words to tell the story of your drawing?"
  - Encourages integration of literacy and numeracy in self-expression.

### Middle Grades

- **Math:** "You've set up your equations. How can you check if your answers are correct?"
  - Builds self-checking and problem-solving strategies.
- **Science:** "You're observing the experiment. What do you predict will happen if we change one variable?"
  - Encourages hypothesis formation and critical thinking.
- **Social Studies:** "We're learning about communities. What questions could you ask someone in a different city to learn about their daily life?"
  - Promotes inquiry and perspective-taking.
- **Language Arts:** "Your story is so creative. What details could you add to help your reader imagine it better?"
  - Enhances descriptive writing and audience awareness.
- **Integrated:** "You've read about this historical event. How can we use a graph or chart to understand its impact?"
  - Encourages analysis and visual representation of information. Gives space for input while respecting their pace.

## High School

- **Math:** "You've worked out the problem. How can you explain your method to help others understand?"
  - Develops communication and teaching skills in mathematics.
- **Science:** "You're designing your experiment. What data will you collect to support your hypothesis?"
  - Promotes planning and evidence-based reasoning.
- **Social Studies:** "We're discussing civil rights movements. How could you connect historical events to issues today?"
  - Encourages critical thinking and real-world connections.
- **Language Arts:** "You've written a strong thesis. What evidence could you add to make your argument even more convincing?"
  - Strengthens argumentative writing and evidence-based reasoning.
- **Integrated:** "You've found different sources for your project. How can you compare them to find the most reliable information?"
  - Builds critical evaluation and research skills.