

Crowd Control

by Alexis O'Neill

You don't have to be a former teacher to learn how to apply crowd control strategies when you do school visits. Here are some tips that will work, no matter how large or small your audience.

An interactive presentation is the antidote to behavior problems. At the start of his assembly, [Dan Hanna](#) (*The Pout-Pout Fish*) shows kids photos of "famous pouters" from Galileo to Barack Obama, and asks kids to guess who the pouters are. He gives prizes to those who guess correctly. [Caroline Hatton](#) (*The Night Olympic Team*) shows photos of winter Olympic sports in the middle of her presentation and has kids guess what they are. She doesn't give prizes. In both instances, the presenters set up the expectation that kids will be involved, so kids pay attention.

On-site crowd control begins with set-up. Have your host arrange seating in a format that works best for you. For example, I want to be able to walk into the audience to make eye contact with kids as I speak and avert "situations" before they escalate (see the "proximity" tip below). I have kids seated on the floor, an aisle up the middle, with teachers sitting in chairs on the outer edges. This way, I can see the whole audience at once and reach kids quickly when searching for volunteers.

Meet kids as they file into the room. I make eye contact and say hello or do high-fives to kids as they file in. This establishes a relationship before I even begin my assembly.

Have a "quiet down" signal. Most schools have kids sit "criss-cross applesauce" so that others behind them can see. It's fine to remind kids to do this if they get excited and begin to sit up on their knees. Also, most schools have a special signal (two fingers in the air, a clapping pattern, etc.) for asking kids to be quiet. You might use their signal. I use my own. If the kids are buzzing and I want to begin or move on to the next segment, I hold up two hands, palms out and say, "Watch my hands" then I'm quiet until they are attentive.

Proximity, proximity, proximity. If kids are talking

or squirreling around, sometimes a locked-eyeballs look gets them to settle down. If not, I quickly go up to them, cover my microphone so that others can't hear, and ask, "Are you okay?" This usually stuns them. They're usually being told what to do and not asked about their well-being. If they're too close to each other, I suggest that they give each other more room. Sometimes, teachers are chatterboxes (and yes, this does happen). First, I stand beside them while I address the audience, putting them in the spotlight. If this doesn't get them to stop, I cover the microphone and ask innocently, "Did you have a question for me?" This usually does the trick.

The deadly Q&A. If you decide to do a Question & Answer session in a large assembly, this is one of those spots where you are most likely to lose your audience.. Q&As work best in a library or classroom setting where the audience is small. You can avoid problems by a) repeating the question asked by the student, b) keeping your answers short and addressing the whole group, c) illustrating answers with images and d) limiting the time devoted to the Q&A.

One last thing. No matter what crowd control issue you may face, here's the most important thing to remember: *never, ever embarrass students by chastising their behavior, and never ask them to leave the room if they are acting up.* We all have had our days and not every group is angelic. Weather, holidays, time of day all can impact behavior. None of this is in your control – but you can be aware of it. However, if kids are "bored" and fidgety, you might want to take a harder look at your presentation and find more ways to engage your audience in more meaningful ways. And if all else fails, it's okay to cut your presentation short while you still have their attention, be cheerful, and make it seem as if that is what you planned all along!

Alexis O'Neill, Ph.D., is the author of THE RECESS QUEEN and other award-winning books for children. She has been an elementary school teacher, a teacher of teachers, and a museum educator. She is a popular school visit presenter and helps other authors create and deliver quality programs. Visit her at www.schoolvisitexperts.com
