

Teacher-Student Relationships

Anything a teacher can do to improve their relationships with students can have an impact on how well their students do, both academically and socially. Students who have a close and supportive connection to their teacher, and who receive positive reinforcement and praise, will be more engaged in the learning, will exhibit fewer behaviour problems, and will do better academically.

This seems obvious to me, but I know teachers who don't believe this, or have trouble achieving it, as I once did. Let's look at this idea a little more closely.

Here are some examples that demonstrate why a good relationship with students can be so important.

- Students experiencing conflict at home will be more likely to talk to you about it.
- Students having difficulty academically will be more likely to approach you for help.
- Students experiencing bullying at school will be more likely to tell you about it.

When students don't talk about these things with a teacher, their learning suffers. You need to develop a relationship with your students such that they *trust you enough to confide in you*.

There is a lot of evidence to support this. Positive teacher-student relationships help students adjust to school, especially in the early grades. They contribute to a growth in social skills and academic performance. Teachers who have close relationships with students find that their students are more likely to attend regularly, are more cooperative, and more engaged in the learning. Students also tend to like school more.

So, what would a positive relationship with your students look like in your classroom?

- You show your enjoyment of students. You enjoy being around them.
- You interact with your students in a respectful manner.

- You seldom are irritable or angry with your students, or at least, you don't show it.
- You know about your students' background, interests, hobbies and academic ability.
- You offer help, both for academic and social problems.
- You help students reflect on their learning skills.

How do you make this happen?

- Make an effort to get to know all of your students.
- Spend time with them individually, especially the shy or 'problem' kids.
- Always make it clear to them that you expect them to do well in school.
- Create a positive climate in your classroom, one that encourages students to interact with you and their classmates in a respectful way.

Things to watch out for:

- Just developing a positive relationship with your students is not enough if you want them to do well. You must offer high-quality teaching, and hold high expectations for their learning.
- Sometimes a positive relationship with some students is hard to achieve. Don't give up! These are the students who will most benefit from it. Try to get to know them in a setting outside the classroom. Look for their good qualities.

This is what I've always found is the most difficult part of being a Jr. High teacher. I truly do enjoy being in their company, but the difficult ones can be a challenge to get to know and like. It's something I keep working at.

Some more examples:

- Knowing a student's interests can help you create examples in the material you are teaching that relate to those interests. For example, if some students are avid snowboarders, make up some math problems about snowboarding.
- Knowing your students' strengths and weaknesses can help them to achieve. For example, some students are easily distracted and need a quiet place to do their work.

Dealing with difficult students:

Do you find yourself constantly nagging at certain students to get them to change their bad behaviours? No-one likes to be nagged, and this seldom works. Instead, be positive. Talk to the students individually and come up with some strategies together that will help them engage in the lessons. Difficult students will require more of your time and energy, but *the more they get to know and trust you, the less difficult they will become.*

More stuff that's important:

Do you always give meaningful feedback? Do you talk to them about their successes, or are you always focused on what they haven't done yet? Are your conversations with them positive, and are you showing this with your voice and body language? Do you give them your full attention when they are talking to you? Are you modelling good behaviour?

Is the written work you have corrected and given back full of large red X's? Try marking to emphasize the *correct* answers ... use lots of red checkmarks for the good answers instead!

All of these things are critical if you want to maintain a good relationship with your students.

Build a sense of community in your classroom:

A positive climate is important. Create fun learning activities that allow students to explore connections between what they've already learned and what they're learning. Allow discussion. Give the students choices. And don't be afraid of a little noise ... good administrators know that often a noisy classroom is one where real learning is happening!

Some Behaviour Theories

There are several theories about how children behave in a classroom that illustrate why better relationships will help your students to learn.

Attachment Theory suggests that students who have close relationships with their teachers will feel more secure in taking risks and making

mistakes. They know you're there to support them and give them encouragement.

Self-System Theory suggests that students have psychological needs; the need to be good at what they're doing (competence), the need for freedom to make choices and explore things in their own way (autonomy) and the need to be socially connected to others (relatedness). Positive teacher-student relationships can help students meet these needs. Teachers can offer feedback to bolster their confidence, recognize individual student differences, and promote a positive climate in the classroom where students feel comfortable and can interact with each other. Classrooms that foster the feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness will have engaged students who are motivated to learn.

Here are some research findings that provide an interesting aside to what I've been talking about:

- Boys typically have more conflict and less closeness in their relationships with teachers than girls. (*Baker, 2006; Blankemeyer, Flannery, & Vazsonyi, 2002*)
- Students with internalized problems (depression or anxiety) show greater dependency on their teachers than other students (*Henricsson & Rydell, 2004*)
- Students with externalized problems (aggression or problem behaviours) show more conflict with teachers (*Murray & Murray, 2004*).
- Students with poor relationships with family members tend to have poor relationships with their teachers (*O'Connor & McCartney, 2006*).

High quality teacher-student relationships are equally important for all students, regardless of age, gender or ability. Students with behaviour or academic problems will benefit the most, but all students will benefit. If students believe that their teacher trusts them, if they trust their teacher, and if the teacher develops a good personal relationship with them, the students will be more engaged, more willing to follow the rules of your classroom, and more likely to learn.