W 1049

Strategies for Building Strong Connections with Students

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Teachers know best that connecting with their students produces promising results. As students spend around six hours per day at school, teachers are important mentors who instill critical skills for school and life. Having a safe, stable and nurturing relationship with at least one adult, such as a teacher or mentor, can be an essential resource for boosting student resiliency.[1] This fact sheet provides strategies for building connections with students to optimize their success.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY [2-6]

Each new school year brings about nerves regarding what the upcoming year has in store. Building rapport with each student through sincere and authentic efforts helps cultivate a community of trust and inspires positive growth. A healthy classroom community includes:

- Shared norms on group expectations,
- Collaborative strategies for managing conflict,
- Creating belonging to celebrate sameness and uniqueness,
- Freedom to use your voice,
- Openness to explore new experiences, and
- Opportunities to address self-care, such as a safe, comfortable place to decompress emotions.

SEVEN STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING REWARDING CONNECTIONS [7]

Students succeed in learning if they like who is teaching them and feel the learning environment is safe and supportive. Students and teachers alike will benefit from finding the best strategy that makes their relationship uniquely rewarding. Here are some simple ways to build community in classroom settings.

The Two-By-Ten: Created by researcher Raymond Wlodkowski, the two-by-ten is a research-based method for effectively reducing behavioral disruptions. Teachers interact one-on-one with a struggling student for two minutes each day over ten consecutive days. During the two minutes, spend time connecting about life unrelated to school (*What do you enjoy doing outside of school? What is your favorite family recipe?*).[8] This approach lessens disruptive behavior through building a positive connection between the student and a trusted adult. Take it a step further by pairing students together to connect for two minutes each day for ten days, then rotate with new student pairings and new conversation prompts. (Several prompts are available online, see reference #8.)

Four at the Door Plus One More: Intentionally checking in helps determine how students are feeling and makes them feel understood. Use the first four greetings to welcome students as they enter each morning and follow up with a fifth greeting later in the day:

1. **Meet the Eye** – Help students feel seen by making eye contact.
2. **Greet with Names** – Help students feel noticed by using their names.
3. **Bump Elbows** – Help students feel moved with elbow bumps or other gestures, like a fist bump, high-five or dance move.
4. **Connect Hearts** – Help students feel loved by spending time learning about who they are, their interests and what life is like outside of school.
5. **Plus One More** – Help students feel connected by checking in again later in the day to acknowledge you are interested in their day.

Fact Check: Encourage students to pair up with different students by connecting on shared characteristics. During circle time or when grouping students, ask one student to share a simple fact about themselves (e.g., *A fact about me is that I was raised in Tennessee; A fact about me is that I have two dogs*). Ask other students in the group to raise their hand if they share the same fact or relate to it. Connections continue until everyone has made a connection in the class.

Treat Pass: A fun way to talk about challenging or more personal topics involves sharing a snack, candy or another non-food treat (i.e., stickers). Each item comes with an assigned question that a student must answer before distributing it. Questions should be social and emotional, rather than academic, in nature.[8] Examples might include, *What is something that makes you proud? What five words best describe you and why? Choose a person and compliment them. Share a goal you have for yourself. What positive choices have you made this week?*

Praise Post Cards: Praise can be a powerful motivator for success. Mail postcards that celebrate activities or events happening in the classroom or acknowledge birthdays, good grades and other classroom achievements.

Smash Book: Journaling offers a creative way to establish moments for students to reach out to their teacher. Ask students to record entries in a journal (or virtual diary) to discuss their thoughts, feelings, likes, hobbies and experiences from the day. Students can compile a variety of material in their smash book; writings, artwork, stickers, magazine clippings, photos and more. If students are comfortable and provide consent, respond to their journal entries. While students may open up about challenging things, be mindful that any concerning information should be reported per the mandatory reporting protocol of your administration or institution.

Show and Tell: Sharing personal qualities about life outside of school can bridge connections. In this classic activity, students bring items from home for peers to learn more about who they are outside of school. Students can take turns comparing and sharing a new fact they have learned about their peers.

CONCLUSION

Decades of research highlight that students who receive social and emotional learning (SEL) training at school have 13 percent higher academic achievement scores compared to students who receive no formal SEL training.[9] Students need their basic needs met, both physical and socio-emotional, before new learning can take place. Teachers who address in-the-moment needs and advocate for students optimize their educational development and life potential.

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