

Beginning on a positive note

At the beginning of the year, it is important that teachers make time for establishing relationships. The goal should be to ensure that all students feel a sense of belonging that is characterised by trust, connection, and understanding. For students with learning or behavioural problems, cultivating positive relationships...

Teachers could:

- “Bank time” with students. Schedule one-on-one meetings with students to get to know them better. The goal is to “make deposits into the relationship” to help ease conflict in the future if you have to give constructive feedback or address disruptive behaviour.
- Encourage student-led activities. Students feel more invested in their learning if given the opportunity to share their interests. Teachers can step aside, be supportive, and listen.
- Welcome students into the classroom. Activities such as positive greetings at the door and icebreaker questions help create a warm classroom culture.
- Use positive communication techniques. Open-ended questions, reflective listening, validation statements, expressions of enthusiasm or interest, and compliments help students especially shy or introverted ones ease into classroom discussions.

Maintaining relationships

Without active maintenance, relationships deteriorate over time. Teachers could focus too much on academics and not enough on supporting students’ emotional well-being, slowly using up the banked time they initially built up with students.

Teachers can maintain relationships by continuing to implement the strategies above, and in addition, they can:

- Take note of positive and negative interactions with students. Teachers should aim for a five-to-one ratio.
- Regularly check in with students. Ask how they’re doing and what support they may need.
- Acknowledge good behaviour. When teachers focus attention on positive conduct, disruptive behaviour will stem before it becomes an issue.

Before things get worse, repair any harm

Eventually, negative interactions such as misunderstandings, conflict, or criticism can weaken a teacher-student relationship. If these negative interactions are left unaddressed, students may feel disengaged and be less willing to participate in activities. They may also be more likely to misbehave, creating further damage. So it's important for teachers to "intentionally reconnect" with students to restore the relationship to a positive state.

When relationships need repair, teachers can:

- Let go and start fresh. Teachers should avoid holding mistakes over a student's head, instead giving them a chance to start each day with a clean slate.
- Take responsibility for their actions. Teachers can avoid blaming students when things go wrong, and think, "What could I have done to avoid the problem in the first place?" They shouldn't be afraid to apologise when that's called for doing so helps build trust with students.
- Show empathy. There are two sides to every story, and a teacher can acknowledge that students may have different perspectives about what happened.
- Focus on solutions, not problems. Teachers can work with students to find a solution that everyone feels is fair.
- Separate the deed from the doer. It's important to criticise the behaviour, not the person. If teachers label children as "problem students," there's a danger that they'll internalise that label, making it more likely that they'll repeat the behaviour in the future.

The takeaway: Effective classroom management starts with relationship building. When students feel a greater sense of belonging, they're more likely to be academically engaged and demonstrate positive behaviour.

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