

# Positive relationships

“The quality of the teacher–student relationship is the single most important factor to consider when rethinking classroom management.”

– Patricia Sequeira Belvel and Maya Marcia Jordan,  
*Rethinking Classroom Management*

Positive relationships are the foundation of any classroom-based approach to positive behaviour supports. They are the key to a safe and caring classroom climate that invites and supports positive behaviour and skilled problem solving. Relationships between teachers and students, among students, and between teachers and parents are all important contributors to the classroom environment.

## Teacher–student relationships

The teacher–student relationship, which is extremely important, takes time and trust to build. Both parties must believe they are being treated with dignity and respect, and there must be a balance between the teacher’s role as classroom leader and his or her expression of interest in each student.

Students trust and respect teachers who establish clear behavioural expectations and meaningful goals for learning and behaviour, and who follow up consistently. Students know that their teacher cares about them and their individual needs when:

- learning goals are flexible enough to accommodate differences between and among students
- the teacher makes an effort to understand each student’s individual interests, strengths, needs, learning preferences and personality.

## Sample strategies to win over students

- *Meet students at the door at the beginning of every day.*  
Teachers can use this strategy to informally engage students individually, ask how they are doing, gauge their emotional state, have a brief conversation and/or just generally make them feel welcome.
- *Demonstrate a personal interest in students.*  
Take time in class and in the hallways or on the playground to talk with students about their lives outside of school.

- *Use students' names positively.*  
Students of any age generally respond positively when a teacher smiles at them and acknowledges them by name, especially in the hallway or on the playground. This simple action lets students know they matter and are valued as individuals within the school community.
- *Smile, use humour and show enthusiasm.*  
Being able to see the lighter side and injecting humour into the day goes a long way toward bringing students on side and diffusing potentially negative interactions. Let students know when you are particularly enjoying the teaching role.

### Noncontingent positive reinforcement<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Covey (1989) describes noncontingent positive reinforcement as deposits in another person's emotional bank account. Many students, and particularly those with behaviour disabilities, have emotional bank accounts that are close to empty. To help these students feel more connected, teachers need to help them build their emotional bank accounts.

Noncontingent positive reinforcement is unconditional and independent. That is, students do not have to demonstrate specific behaviours in order to earn it.

Noncontingent positive reinforcement can be as simple as smiling at a student at the beginning of class, asking a student who enjoys attention to write key words on the board during a class discussion, or sharing a snack or favourite story as a wrap-up to the week. Ensure that noncontingent reinforcement is appropriate for the student's age, interests and personal preferences.

Noncontingent reinforcement is an essential component of the teacher–student relationship. It forms the foundation for trust and security, and provides bonding and connections that teachers and students need. It helps students learn that demonstrating respect and caring is a natural aspect of human interaction.

Noncontingent reinforcement:

- sets the stage for intrinsic motivation
- forms a foundation of trust
- fosters a sense of security
- creates a comfortable climate
- creates a positive association with the teacher

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1. Adapted from Patricia Sequeira Belvel and Maya Marcia Jordan, *Rethinking Classroom Management: Strategies for Prevention, Intervention, and Problem Solving*, pp. 38, 41, copyright 2003 by Corwin Press, Inc. Adapted by permission of Corwin Press, Inc.

- increases the probability of cooperation
- models positive actions for students to emulate.

### Proximity

Teachers who move around the classroom and teach from various areas and near different students:

- send the message that they are actively involved and aware of all behaviour in the room
- build a sense of connection with students and communicate that the teacher is interested and available
- provide equal access to the teacher for all students
- have more opportunities to prevent negative behaviour and/or quickly deal with problems.

### Effective communication<sup>2</sup>

A number of variables affect how students perceive and respond to a teacher's communication. To effectively communicate expectations and requests to students:

- use polite requests rather than questions; for example, "Please start your work"
- move close to students when giving directions—the optimal distance is approximately one metre
- look students in the eye (considering cultural differences and not insisting on eye contact if it makes the student uncomfortable)
- use a quiet voice
- give students at least 10 seconds to respond before repeating a request or adding a new request
- ask only twice, and then follow through with a correction; the more often a request is made, the less the likelihood of gaining cooperation
- make only one request at a time
- remain calm and unemotional
- make more start requests ("do") than stop requests ("don't"). If the majority of requests are not start requests, consider clarifying behavioural expectations and using stronger prompts
- verbally reinforce students when they demonstrate cooperation. This will increase cooperation in the future.

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2. Adapted with permission from Sopris West Educational Services. *The Tough Kid Book: Practical Classroom Management Strategies*, by Ginger Rhode, William R. Jenson and H. Kenton Reavis © 1998, p. 61.

### Verbal limits<sup>3</sup>

When students are not meeting classroom behavioural expectations or following agreed-upon procedures, describe the appropriate behaviour with a neutral body posture and tone of voice, and without using students' names. Verbal limit setting has four basic forms.

1. **Prompt with questioning intonation:** "Everyone has their math book open?" Say this declaratively, as a prompt, not a question. If you ask a question ("Will you open your books?"), you may receive an answer you don't want.
2. **Hint:** "Everything should be off your desks." This statement includes everyone in the room.
3. **"Excuse me":** For example, to respectfully break habits of interrupting, you could say, "Hold on for a minute, Mel. We can't hear you because someone else is speaking."
4. **I-message:** Saying "I need" or "I want" is stronger and more assertive than the other verbal limit-setting techniques. For example, "I need everyone to sit down."

### Student–student relationships

Building and fostering relationships among students creates a feeling of community, which can make a difference in the behaviour and learning of each and every student in the class. Students need to learn to:

- recognize the strengths and skills that each individual brings to the classroom
- look for opportunities to build on those skills and support each other in areas of need
- respect and show appreciation for each other, which includes listening to one another and disagreeing in appropriate ways.

### Sample strategies to build positive student–student relationships

- *Use flexible grouping.*  
Create regular opportunities for students to learn with and from all of the students in the class, rather than just their best friends or the students they feel most comfortable with. This approach fosters a climate of acceptance and openness to the varied strengths, interests and challenges among students in the class. Ensure students have opportunities to work independently, with different partners, in small groups and in larger groups throughout the school day.

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3. Adapted from Patricia Sequeira Belvel and Maya Marcia Jordan, *Rethinking Classroom Management: Strategies for Prevention, Intervention, and Problem Solving*, p. 174, copyright 2003 by Corwin Press, Inc. Adapted by permission of Corwin Press, Inc.

- *Teach skills for cooperative learning.*  
Most students with behaviour and social difficulties find cooperative group work challenging. They need specific instruction about roles, responsibilities and the expected outcomes of group tasks.
  - Teach specific roles such as recorder, timer, reporter.
  - Modify individual students' roles and responsibilities to accommodate their needs and strengths.
  - Directly teach specific formats for different tasks such as how to brainstorm a list of ideas or how to interview a partner.
  - Provide visual or written organizers for each task.
  - Use timers and clocks when there are specific time requirements.
  - Initially assign cooperative work that involves brief and preferred tasks, and then gradually move into longer times and more complex tasks.
- *Teach a vocabulary of appreciation.*  
Explicitly discuss, demonstrate and model how to give positive feedback to other students and how to graciously accept compliments and positive comments.

## School bonding

Most students become emotionally attached and committed to their school and classroom. To be engaged members of the school community, students need to see the school, both the physical building and the community of people inside, as safe and welcoming. They also want to feel pride in their school and to play a role in making the school a positive place. They want to be active and valued members of the school community.

Fostering a relationship between students and their learning is also a critical element of successful school bonding. Students need to see value in what they are being asked to learn. They need to feel they have a connection to their learning and some control over the learning process. Teachers should provide flexible and meaningful learning goals that encourage students to take ownership of their learning.

Staff can promote school bonding by having students work with each other across grades. For example, they can organize cross-age activities such as buddy reading, and plan school-wide special events, assemblies and annual celebrations.

## Sample strategies to increase school bonding

- *Create classroom jobs.*  
At the beginning of the year, brainstorm a list of classroom jobs such as taking attendance, handing out papers, feeding the class pet and tidying the

reading corner. Assign jobs randomly or ask students to apply for the jobs they want. Create a simple job application, including the name of the job, why the student wants the job and the skills he or she brings to it. Students can also indicate two other jobs they are interested in. Consider rotating responsibilities every week, month or term so that students can try a variety of jobs throughout the year.

- *Display samples of student work.*  
Display drawings, writing exercises or completed assignments in a prominent place in the classroom. Rotate the displays frequently and ensure that at some point during the month each student has at least one piece of well-done work completed and displayed.

## Teacher–parent relationships

When teachers and parents communicate regularly and work collaboratively, they are more likely to develop a degree of trust. Then, if a behavioural concern arises, they are more inclined to respect and support each other.

Parents are important members of the learning team. Look for ways to involve them in supporting positive classroom behaviour.

### Sample strategies to build positive parent–teacher relationships

- *Involve parents and students in learning conferences.*  
Many schools are replacing parent–teacher interviews with a conference format that more actively involves both students and parents. In the conference format:
  - the student can contribute to the discussion, and the parent can listen and ask questions and give feedback
  - participants are encouraged to focus on things that are going well, celebrate the student’s learning strengths and set new goals together.
- *Share good news with parents.*  
When communicating with parents about their children’s behaviour, include information about what is going well and the positive things the student shows an interest in.



The Learning Team – A handbook for parents of children with special needs:  
<https://education.alberta.ca/diverse-learners/meeting-the-needs-of-each-student/everyone/handbook>