

# Positive relationships

“Children are more likely to be respectful when important adults in their lives respect them. They are more likely to care about others if they know they are cared about.”

– Alfie Kohn, *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community*

Research indicates that one of the most effective interventions for encouraging positive behaviour is to build positive relationships that cross all age boundaries: among adults in the school community, between adults and students, and among students. The relationships between students and adults are particularly important; that is, relationships of students with teachers, bus drivers, agency partners, lunchroom staff and other adult members of the school community. *Positive involvement in school activities and strong relationships with at least one adult at school can significantly change the way a student feels about school.*

## Principal's Story

We held a session for bus drivers. We encouraged them to make personal contact with every student riding on their bus and offered practical strategies. In many cases it was as simple as making an effort to say hello to each student as he or she got on the bus each day.

– Principal, rural junior high school

Strong relationships between students, including peer mentorships, can also promote a sense of belonging to the school community. In all cases, these relationships must be built on both social skills and core values such as respect—the same kinds of values that are supported through character and citizenship education. By embracing, modelling and teaching core values, school staff can create a climate in which behavioural expectations are a natural extension of a belief in treating each other fairly and respectfully.

## Principal's Story

We are in our fifth year of implementing an effective behaviour support system in our school. In the third year, we started to combine our efforts with a character education initiative, specifically focusing on the seven virtues outlined in Michele Borba's *Building Moral Intelligence: The Seven Essential Virtues that Teach Kids to Do the Right Thing* [for details, see Appendix B of this resource]. Our ongoing focus is on empathy and self-control.

Every two weeks we have assemblies that focus on skill building and then follow up with activities to reinforce the skill. The assemblies, which are presented by cross-graded groups of students and teachers, introduce a skill related to a particular virtue. For example, we might talk about making positive choices related to fairness.

The data we have collected over four years shows a dramatic drop in behaviour incidents and a corresponding increase in students' ability to verbalize what they are feeling. Before we had a behaviour support system, you never knew how a student would react to what you said. Now our students, staff and parents have a common language that helps ensure that everyone is treated fairly. We can turn to students when there is a situation and ask, "Is that hurtful or helpful?"

Effective behaviour supports and character education are congruent approaches because of the common language. The first initiative targets behaviour and teaches a specific skill. The second targets a virtue and teaches a specific skill. Character education is a nice extension that brings in the whole idea of being a good citizen and person: we are all responsible for our own behaviour.

– Principal, urban elementary school



For more information on character education, see Alberta Education's *The Heart of the Matter: Character and Citizenship Education in Alberta Schools*, at [https://education.alberta.ca/media/142774/the\\_heart\\_of\\_the\\_matter\\_character\\_education\\_and\\_citizenship\\_in\\_alberta\\_schools.pdf](https://education.alberta.ca/media/142774/the_heart_of_the_matter_character_education_and_citizenship_in_alberta_schools.pdf).

## Enhancing home–school relationships

Parents are their children’s primary educators, particularly when it comes to social behaviour. Through their behaviour and attitudes, parents play direct and indirect roles in supporting a positive school culture.

### Principal’s Story

When I was appointed new principal of a Kindergarten to Grade 6 school, suspensions were all too common. We organized a staff development day to provide an opportunity to really talk about behavioural expectations, interventions and monitoring. Then we started collecting data. During the first year, we concentrated on monitoring suspensions only. The data we gathered was clear evidence that the frequency of suspension was inappropriate.

Halfway through the school year, I presented this data to parents at a school meeting, along with information from the parent and student satisfaction surveys. Although the satisfaction surveys showed that the students felt safe and cared about, their attitude toward discipline was poor. There was also a perception among staff and the school community that the school had a weak discipline policy.

So we clearly explained the rules about keeping hands to yourself, theft and picking up litter, and all parents and children signed the discipline form. Out of almost 400 families, less than half a dozen responded negatively.

The parents actively supported our approach, and their support helped bring around some of the teachers who were initially skeptical. We kept parents informed through a newsletter. Suspensions dropped from 42 to fewer than 10, and issues of bullying dropped to a single incident that first year. Parents started to talk about what a great school we had!

– Principal, elementary school

Schools can use strategies such as these to support and enhance parental involvement.

- Actively welcome parents into the school and create opportunities for them to become directly involved in student activities in the classroom.

- Use newsletters, school council meetings and other communication channels to ensure parents are informed of the school’s behavioural expectations, as well its successes with positive behaviour supports. School newsletters offer opportunities to:
  - talk about the importance of using the same language to reinforce behaviour at home and in school (e.g., home and school both deliver the message, “We use *words*, not hitting” to solve problems)
  - have parents give feedback, share concerns and ask questions about behavioural expectations and school climate.
- Invite parents to have input and participate in developing, assessing and revising the school’s behaviour goals.
- Encourage parents to communicate with the school if they notice their child having difficulty with social behaviour at home or in the community.
- Post school-wide behavioural expectations for specific settings so parents understand them and can use the same language with their children.

Schools might develop an information sheet for parents similar to the one below.

This term’s focus is on helping children develop self-discipline.

You can use the following strategies to reinforce this positive behaviour at home.

- Listen to your child.
- Be firm, consistent and kind.
- Resist arguing over small things.
- Clearly describe your limits and tolerance level.
- Assign chores so your child has real opportunities to contribute.
- Help your child organize his or her belongings.
- Agree on a signal you can use to let your child know his or her behaviour is not acceptable.
- Be sure to reinforce your child when he or she does the right thing.
- Establish a regular family discussion time such as the evening meal, when everyone has a chance to talk about their day.
- Appeal to your child’s sense of fair play.
- Establish a regular homework time and a regular bedtime.
- Make sure your child eats a healthy breakfast.
- Read stories with your child and discuss how the characters solve problems in positive ways.