

The Idea: Building Positive Relationships with Pupils



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Why do we need to build positive relationships with pupils?

Building positive relationships with pupils is important for success in the classroom. Pupils who have positive interactions with staff have fewer behavioural problems. They are also more likely to engage with their learning and have better educational outcomes.

The benefits for positive relationships extend to educators too. Teachers report that having positive relationships with their pupils is important for their own wellbeing. In a study conducted by Aldrup et al. (2018), teachers reported greater levels of enthusiasm for their work when they felt more connected to their pupils.

What do positive relationships look like?

Human relationships are both complex and diverse and so it would be over-simplistic to describe what positive relationships look like in a classroom. Strategies that work with one group of pupils might not work for another and so an effective adult will adapt their approach to meet the needs of the individuals at hand.

However, we can make some generalisations. Positive teacher–pupil relationships can be characterised by respectful communication, sensitivity and responsiveness, focus and interest on teaching and learning content, and a low level of disruptive behaviour (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009).

Staff in classrooms that display these characteristics understand the importance of connection: pupils tend to be more resilient when facing academic challenges and are more likely to ask for support.

When do we build positive relationships?

Building positive relationships with pupils is a continuous process. Staff can reinforce relationships through teaching and learning and daily interactions with pupils. They can build these relationships, both inside and outside the classroom, during extracurricular and enrichment activities, for example.

How do we build positive relationships with pupils?

You can build positive relationships with your pupils by combining the following strategies:

Know your pupils

Having a good knowledge of the pupils that you encounter can be a very effective tool for underpinning positive relationships with those individuals.

There is a range of information that you can learn about your pupils:

- their interests
- their aspirations
- their context (their background, experiences that may impact on their perceptions and responses, etc.)

Knowing your pupils is useful for building a sense of belonging in the classroom. Staff that encounter large numbers of young people might need to note down information about pupils that they can refer to at a later stage. However, you should be sure to record this information in a secure and appropriate manner.

Put your knowledge to good use

It isn't enough just to know your pupils - you will need to put that knowledge to good use. There are a number of ways that knowing your pupils can be beneficial for supporting learning and effective behaviour management, including:

- being able to anticipate pupil responses to certain situations and therefore prevent behaviour issues before they occur;
- being able to incorporate pupil interests into lessons to make learning more engaging;
- being able to enlist the help of others to support pupils, e.g. parents and influential peers;
- being able to make learning more relevant because it can be linked to the aspirations and potential career choices of pupils;
- understanding why some pupils might be presenting challenging behaviour and using this knowledge to stay calm when handling these problems.

We must add a note of caution here, however. Knowing that a pupil is facing challenges outside the classroom is useful for developing empathy for that young person and recognising that poor behaviour is not always aimed personally at the member of staff concerned. However, educators should avoid making excuses for poor behaviour as this will break down consistency and certainty within school and is likely to disadvantage the pupil concerned further.

Be authentic

Bruyckere and Kirschner (2016) found that pupils want teachers to be their 'true selves' and that when educators are authentic, then positive relationships are formed. Researchers explored how pupils decide whether staff are being authentic and came up with four criteria:

Expertise - The teacher is the expert that brings learning about. Pupils see teachers as authentic when they can explain the content clearly and intelligently. Some pupils also view expertise as a way of caring about pupils and showing involvement with the class.

Passion - Educators also need to demonstrate that they have genuine passion and enthusiasm for the subject area. Pupils believe that if an educator spends time and effort preparing lessons and finding creative ways to bring their learning to life, then they are more authentic. Having expertise regarding subject content is not enough on its own.

Unicity - Pupils believe that if the educator is authentic, every lesson is unique. This is because they feel that the staff preparing that lesson are passionate enough about the subject to make it so.

Distance - This criterion is less about the educator and more about the relationship between the educator and the pupils. It relates to the amount of information that the educator discloses about their personal lives. The research indicates that some appropriate disclosures about an educator's personal life are appreciated by pupils and can help to build relationships and mutual understanding, but there is a fine balance. Pupils did not like it when staff became overfamiliar or too personal.

It is not only important for staff to be authentic: pupils need to feel that they are able to be authentic too. An important part of this is for pupils to be able to feel vulnerable and ask for support. Brené Brown talks about the importance of vulnerability extensively in her work and provides some materials for educators in her [Daring Classrooms Hub](#).

Be predictable

Pupils respond best when they know what is expected of them and the best way to achieve this is through consistent approaches to behaviour management. Young people often have a well-developed sense of justice and when staff deal with behaviour incidents inconsistently, this can break down the relationships between staff and pupils.

Paul Dix describes the importance of consistency in his book, 'When the Adults Change, Everything Changes'. He talks about the role of certainty in adult behaviour and also the part that classroom routines have to play. He identifies ten steps to certainty; these can be summarised as follows:

1. Focus on the original misbehaviour, rather than getting caught up in secondary behaviours.
2. Display consistency on your classroom walls.
3. Manage issues with a scripted, emotionless response.
4. Use phone calls and notes home to reinforce positive behaviour.
5. Map routines, learning habits and rituals for those who are struggling.
6. Have clear tariffs for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.
7. Use the term, 'you can be certain that...' when describing consequences.
8. Don't judge yourself when you are inconsistent - just return to consistency.
9. Don't apply high-level sanctions to minor indiscretions.
10. Execute sanctions on the same day so that the pupil can move on.

Show them you care

Pupils will usually respond better to staff when they know that these adults have their best interests at heart. You can show pupils that you care by communicating this in a range of subtle ways. This can be as simple as using their name when talking to them, enquiring whether they need any support, or asking them if they had a good weekend.

Creating a warm and caring environment in your classroom can counteract the potential threat to relationships that can occur when staff have to correct or sanction a pupil.

Aim for more positive interactions than negative ones

There is good evidence to indicate that having a higher ratio of positive interactions to negative ones results in fewer behaviour issues in the classroom and increased engagement in learning (Cook et al., 2016). The ratio suggested was five positive interactions for every negative engagement.

Obviously, maintaining a ratio of 5:1 will not always be possible in the classroom and striving to do so could lead to your interactions being artificial and inauthentic. However, it is useful to keep a mental tally of whether your interactions are positive or negative; this will help to remind you to be positive when the opportunity arises.

Use humour when appropriate

Humour can be another useful tool in building relationships. Appleby (2018) suggests that the careful use of humour can have a wide range of benefits, including increased engagement in learning, improved attendance, a reduction in stress and an increase in divergent thinking.

Humour works best when it is related to the subject matter being taught and is natural rather than rehearsed or forced. Effective use of humour can make lessons more enjoyable and memorable which has obvious benefits for both learning and relationship building.

Having said this, certain types of humour can be counterproductive. Staff should avoid using humour that:

- embarrasses or demeans individuals;
- is beyond the understanding of pupils;
- could be misinterpreted;
- has inappropriate content (e.g. discriminatory, sexual, violent or inappropriate language).

Be sensitive with sanctions

We have already explored the importance of being consistent with corrections and sanctions. However, the way that corrections and sanctions are delivered can build or break relationships within the classroom. Try to correct inappropriate behaviour using the least invasive behaviour sanction, to get the outcome you want. Where possible, praise in public but correct in private.

If you would like to do some more work on using the [least invasive behaviour intervention](#), we have a separate OneStep course on this.

This Will Help If...

- you want to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom
- you want to show pupils that you genuinely care about them
- you want to prevent conflicts and argumentative behaviour
- you want pupils to enjoy your lessons and follow agreed rules

Start Your Research Here

[This TED Talk](#) by Rita Pierson is about why every child needs a champion.

[This short video](#) by Edutopia explains why it is important to build relationships through closeness, consistency and trust.

Brené Brown talks about vulnerability in [this TED Talk](#) about Daring Classrooms. She also offers a range of resources for educators on her [Daring Classrooms Hub](#), all of which are free of charge.

Action Points

Audit your relationships with pupils

Do some baseline analysis of your current relationships with your pupils. Ask yourself questions like:

What do I know about my pupils?

How am I using that knowledge to impact on behaviour?

Where do I encounter problematic behaviour and what might the triggers be?

Which groups of pupils respond well to me and which not so well? Why might this be?

Which individuals or groups don't I know so well and how could I get to know them better?

Note that your answers might vary for different groups or individuals. Once you have completed your audit, identify ways in which you can build on your knowledge of pupils and use this to promote good behaviour and create a positive learning environment.

Foster authenticity in your classroom

Consider the four criteria that pupils use to decide if an educator is authentic:

- Expertise
- Unicity
- Passion
- Distance

Evaluate which of these are your personal strengths and which are areas for improvement. Over the period of a couple of weeks, work on one of these areas, evaluating how pupils respond to the changes you make.

If necessary, take each criterion in turn, spending several weeks developing your practice.

If you want to take things further and foster authenticity in your pupils, have a look at some of the resources offered in the [Daring Classrooms Hub](#).

Identify opportunities for relationship building

By now, you have probably identified opportunities for developing your practice. Your next step is to think about imaginative ways of creating opportunities for relationship building. Examples include:

- school trips and residentials
- enrichment opportunities
- informal chats
- extracurricular opportunities
- team building activities

As an individual educator, it will not always be possible to deliver every idea you have. However, the process of identifying possible opportunities will help you to actively look for these over the coming weeks.

Review your progress

Once you have spent a couple of weeks building and using your knowledge of pupils and have fostered authenticity in your classroom, take time to reflect on the progress you have made during this course.

Look at your responses to the questions you asked at the outset and consider what your response would be now. Take some time to celebrate your successes and, if relevant, identify any next steps.

Source Material

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