

STRATEGIES TO CREATE A PRODUCTIVE AND COOPERATIVE
SOCIAL CLIMATE IN YOUR LEARNING COMMUNITY

The Well- Managed CLASSROOM

2ND EDITION



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The Boys Town Education Model and Methods
That Have Transformed Schools Across the Country

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Building Relationships

America's youth are spending more time in school and on academic work than at any time in history. School-aged children between the ages of 6 and 17 spend nearly 33 hours a week at school, an average of 6 to 7 hours a day. As recently as the 1980s, the average was 5 to 6 hours a day in school (Juster, Ono, & Stafford, 2004). With more time being spent at school, the student-teacher relationship takes on even greater importance.

Your success at creating a well-managed classroom depends largely on the quality of the relationships you forge with students. Teacher-student relationships influence everything from the social climate of a school to the individual performance of a student. When students feel liked and respected by their teachers and peers, they enjoy more success in school – academically and behaviorally (Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996; Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997). Conversely, when interpersonal relationships are weak, communication is poor, and mutual trust and respect are lacking, fear and failure rather than safety and success characterize the social climate (Hernandez & Seem, 2004). And as Noguera (1995) notes, “When fear is at the center of student-teacher interactions, teaching becomes almost impossible” (p. 204).

Fortunately, a real sense of physical danger or psychological fear does not permeate most classrooms. Still, there are learning environments that use policies and procedures that promote apprehension and mistrust. The desire of some adults to establish and exert control over and demand compliance from students too often dwarfs efforts to create a sense of warmth, compassion, and fairness. As a result, many of the personal and psychological needs of students are never addressed. This is not to say that teachers knowingly or willfully ignore the non-academic needs of students. Rather, it reflects how outdated clichés such as, “Be tough,” “Don’t give an inch,” or “Keep them busy and look like you’re in charge” – once presented as simple prescriptions for effectively managing a classroom – continue to be ineffectively exercised in some schools.

The Value of Positive Relationships

The quality of students' social relationships influence how they perceive themselves as learners and unique individuals, how much responsibility they assume for their behavior, and how well they perform academically. Students cannot reach their full potential unless their teachers and others in the learning community encourage them through words and actions.

The nature and quality of the relationships you establish and maintain with students shows itself in the social climate of your classroom. The more supportive and positive the climate, the easier it is to have an instructional environment that is motivating and rewarding for students. By creating a classroom that is both open and trusting, you enable students to excel in many ways, such as demonstrating initiative, taking risks (asking more questions, volunteering answers aloud, etc.), and committing themselves to learning. The more you connect with students, the better able you are to promote growth and positive change in their behaviors. Also, the healthier your relationships are with students, the more likely they are to accept rules, procedures, and discipline decisions.

Of course, mutually rewarding and respectful relationships rarely develop in a matter of days, weeks, or even months. Nor can teacher-student relationships ever really be considered fully “developed.” Instead, they continually evolve over time and across events and issues. Two key variables that significantly influence the way relationships grow are...

- The personal or affective qualities of the relationship.
- How you communicate or relate to your students.

Generally speaking, there is a common set of behaviors and attitudes that are both socially acceptable and generally valued by members of our society. These behaviors and values include such concepts as honesty, sensitivity, concern and respect for others, a sense of humor, reliability, willingness to listen, and so on. Many students enter our schools and classrooms without these values and behaviors because of poor role models, or damaged learning histories, or simply because they did not have someone to guide them through a particular phase of development. As with

so many other life skills, it falls on the school – and you – to teach students how they can develop positive adult and peer relationships (see Chapter 10). But in addition to teaching students essential social skills, you also need to maintain a high rate of positive interactions, engage in open, personal discussions, and show genuine interest in their activities beyond the subject matter you teach. All of these things help to humanize teacher-student relationships, as well as the school experience.

Quality relationships with students are especially important when you have young people who feel disconnected from school. Often, they have a variety of behaviors that interfere with their social-emotional development and academic achievement. By improving the quality of your interactions with these students, you can help them engage in more appropriate behaviors and reduce the frequency and severity of their disruptive actions (Jones & Jones, 2007).

Strategies to Build Positive Relationships

Firmness. Compassion. A stimulating teaching style. According to students, teachers who possess these characteristics are more appealing and deserving of respect (Noguera, 1995; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). And respect is the cornerstone of any healthy relationship. But what exactly does it mean to be firm or compassionate? And how do you communicate those values to students in a classroom?

We'll take a closer look at how to be firm in subsequent chapters on rules, procedures, and consequences. As for teaching style (or how you present content), it's important to note that students who are bored and disinterested tend to be more disruptive than students who are actively engaged in and excited by the instructional methods of the teacher. The purpose of this chapter, however, is about how you can bring compassion into the classroom and throughout the learning community.

Compassion can be defined as acts of kindness, expressions of empathy, signs of concern, displays of dignity, and demonstrations of respect. In the classroom or school, you can show your compassion by doing the following:

Be kind. There are many opportunities during a school day to show kindness to students. And kindness can take many forms. Smiling, for example, is a simple but powerful expression. A smile costs nothing but it is one of the richest gifts you can give to students. It can lift the spirits of those who may be feeling down, while also showing them and others that you're friendly, approachable, and easy to talk to.

Welcoming students with letters or notes prior to the beginning of the school year or semester, or giving notes at other appropriate times, such as when a student has accomplished a particularly difficult task, shown significant behavioral improvement, or been elected to student council, are all friendly gestures that can strengthen relationships. The welcome mat, however, should always be out. Greeting students by name when they enter your classroom, walk the hallways, dine in the cafeteria, or attend activities outside of school shows that you're happy to see them. It establishes the perception that you don't consider them a burden, a problem, or unworthy of your attention – which many may feel at home or among their peer groups. In addition, you're modeling good manners; you're demonstrating how “politeness” looks and sounds. When you're trying to create a welcoming environment, it makes sense to extend a hand or say “Hello,” and teach students to do the same. Also, remembering to say “Thank you” when students volunteer, help out, or do anything that makes your job easier shows gratitude and respect.

Express empathy. Empathy can be used to show students how much you care about them and their success. This is crucial whenever you're addressing and correcting behavioral mistakes. Words that show understanding can defuse some of the anger or hurt children feel. Empathy can be expressed vocally by using a soothing, caring tone. Expressions such as, “I know you're unhappy about what just happened,” “I understand how disappointed you feel,” or “I can see this is very important to you,” are nonthreatening phrases you can use to start a dialogue with students who may be feeling angry, disappointed, or embarrassed. (Teaching and modeling empathy can also have a positive effect on students' social relationships. This is especially true in environments where bullying is a problem. Young people who bully or play the role of a bystander – one who does nothing to stop bullies or help victims – often lack empathy and perspective-

taking skills. By helping students be more empathetic, you foster greater understanding and compassion, which are hallmarks of a positive school culture.)

Show concern. Concern is often shown when a student suffers a personal injury or experiences a traumatic life event, but showing concern doesn't have to be limited to these instances. You can also express concern by showing interest in students' activities and achievements beyond the classroom or subject you teach. When students excel in athletics, art, music, drama, or academics, congratulate them on their accomplishments. If a student earns an award for community service or for humanitarian work, recognize the effort. Ask questions about how the student got involved and what he or she hopes to do in the future. Informal chats on topics that are of interest to students are just one more way of reaching out and connecting with them.

You also can bond with students, as well as enjoy a good time with them, by participating in school activities such as "hat day," spirit week, post-prom parties, and other special events sponsored by the student council, various clubs, or other student or parent organizations. Your participation in such events communicates a commitment to their success and well-being that goes beyond the classroom.

Give dignity. In addition to these relationship-building techniques, Marzano (2003) recommends that teachers build positive relationships by creating a cooperative classroom and being considerate of students who have differing learning styles and needs:

- When asking for answers in class, give students time to formulate their response instead of expecting instant replies or moving on before they have a chance to say anything.
- When students are unsure or confused, assist them by rephrasing your questions or clarifying what you want them to do.
- Show patience and listen. We expect students to listen to teachers and other adults in school, but how well do adults listen to the concerns, questions, and needs of students?

- When students offer input or ideas, acknowledge their suggestions and credit them rather than attributing it to yourself or no one.
- Encourage participation from all students by clearly communicating – verbally and behaviorally – the right of everyone to contribute to discussions and activities without fear of being ostracized or criticized.
- Increase positive reinforcement through supportive comments and gestures of affection (thumbs up, pats on the back, high-fives). At Boys Town, we believe that positive comments should outnumber negative feedback by at least four to one.

Communicate respect. The importance of using effective communication skills – making eye contact with students, answering questions pleasantly and enthusiastically, showing pleasant facial expressions, and using humor when appropriate – cannot be overemphasized. These components are what create warm and caring interpersonal interactions, which are critical if students are going to feel a sense of security, belonging, and respect in your learning community.

School Staff as Role Models

Research by noted psychologist Albert Bandura (*Modeling Theory/Social Cognitive Theory*) suggests that individuals tend to emulate the behaviors of significant others – individuals who are perceived as competent, trusting, and a major source of support, direction, and reinforcement. As a teacher, you embody these qualities. You're also in an excellent position, second only to that of the family, to serve as a role model for students.

At school, students learn by watching, just as they learn by doing. Observing the actions of others influences how they respond to their environment and cope with unfamiliar situations. As your students look at you, what messages does your behavior communicate?

Research suggests that the quality of your interactions not only affects the individual relationships you have with students, but

also can influence students' perceptions of their peers. For example, one study found that peer-rejected students were less likely to experience continued rejection if their teachers liked them and communicated that through positive interactions. The opposite was true for peer-rejected students who were disliked by their teachers (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001; Taylor, 1989).

We witnessed a similar phenomena at an urban middle school. During a consultation, we sat in on a class to observe teacher-student interactions. In a span of five minutes, the teacher made the following comments to one student:

- “Rachel, pay attention.”
- “Rachel, be quiet.”
- “Rachel, you know your art supplies don't belong there. Put them where they belong – NOW.”
- “Rachel, do you see how nicely Miguel cleaned up his work station? You need to do the same. Now, Rachel!”

Anytime something happened in this classroom, Rachel was singled out and admonished by her teacher – loudly and publicly. This happened even though other students were not paying attention. Other students were loud. Other students misplaced their art supplies. The teacher's apparent dislike of Rachel reverberated outside the classroom. At recess, she was teased and badgered by classmates who mimicked the teacher's harsh tone. If the teacher could nag Rachel, then it must be okay for others to do the same.

This example, along with various research studies, illustrates how important it is for you and your colleagues at school to engage in interactions and behaviors that are compassionate and caring. Imagine if Rachel's teacher had offered an apology? Or bothered to point out any of the positive things Rachel did in the classroom? Rachel might feel better about herself, and her peers might not see her as a failure or as someone to be scorned.

Obviously, there will be times when disciplinary actions and verbal reprimands are necessary. There also may be times when the pressure of the job and your stress level causes you to be

more harsh or critical than you normally would be. Those moments are going to happen. But they should not be the norm. All students, even the most challenging, need to receive positive comments and affirmations.

Final Thoughts

While we encourage educators to reach out to all their students, we want to caution against abandoning all professional boundaries for the sake of “connecting” with students. Trying to be a “friend” at the expense of being the authority figure is ultimately self-defeating.

Healthy teacher-student relationships share many characteristics of friendship – being kind, showing concern, spending time together, etc. – yet these relationships should not be viewed as true friendships. They’re not. It can be tempting to relax or abandon personal or professional boundaries in an effort to bond with students. However, when boundaries are too lax or inconsistent, students can get confused about what’s appropriate or mistakenly believe that they can violate boundaries, too. This can lead to outrageously inappropriate conversations, acting out in provocative ways (sexually or aggressively), and other “boundary-free” behaviors that harm relationships and the learning environment.

We suggest teachers view their role in the classroom, and their relationship with students, as “in loco parentis” (in place of a parent). You are entrusted by parents to be responsible for their children’s physical and emotional well-being. Therefore, your actions – including attire and appearance – should be guided by what is in the child’s best interests.

As a teacher, you adopt and use specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors to elicit appropriate behavior from your students. The strategies you choose are going to be affected, positively or negatively, by the context in which they are used and the nature and quality of the relationship you have established with your students.

Reviewing Your Relationships

Use this checklist as a prompt to evaluate and reflect on the quality of the relationships you have with your students.

- Would my students describe me as a compassionate teacher?
 - Do I communicate empathy, understanding, concern, and dignity to my students?
 - How well do I know my students? Are there some who I know very little about, and what can I do to strengthen my connection to them?
 - Outside of school, do I know what my students like and dislike?
 - Do I praise my students more often than I correct them?
 - Am I too harsh when I correct them?
 - Would my students describe me as genuine, insincere, or indifferent?
 - Do I participate in school-related activities that are outside my normal teaching duties?
 - What more can I do to reach out to students who struggle with behavior problems?
 - Is my voice tone usually low and pleasant? Is my body language welcoming and relaxed or cold and tense?
 - Do I see my students as interesting individuals, or do I dread seeing them?
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The quality of the teacher-student relationship plays prominently in how students will respond to the intervention strategies outlined in the coming chapters. Some of the strategies actually help strengthen the teacher-student bond while others depend more on an existing positive relationship to be most effective. Creating caring relationships with your students, however, will not resolve every classroom problem nor prevent issues from occurring. That's why concern and understanding must be delicately balanced with realistic limits, and clear and specific expectations.