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Connections

Relationships Are Essential for Engagement



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In this chapter, you will learn about . . .

- The essential nature of relationships
- The components of safe and meaningful relationships
- Common mistakes in relationship building
- Student leadership: the superglue of social relationships
- Establishing, restoring, and maintaining staff relationships

In a synthesis of scientific research on the factors that most contributed to healthy living and especially healthy aging, confident and secure relationships topped the list (Evans 2018). If relationships are essential for the health of retirees, who have had a lifetime to learn how to navigate friendships, romantic partners, breakups, and the losses and joys of relationships, then how much more difficult must the development and maintenance of relationships be for students? As older people in successful long-term relationships know, one of the keys is commitment. That is, effective relationships are not transactional—"I'll do this for you if but only if you do this for me." And telling students to "go out and make some friends" is about as helpful as telling their single teachers and administrators to go to a bar and find a mate. Perhaps it's possible, but the evidence suggests that we must take the importance of relationships much more seriously and give children the time and space that they need to learn not only how to establish relationships but also how to deal with the inevitable challenges that relationships with peers and adults entail.

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We begin this chapter with a summary of the evidence of why relationships are so important. They affect the physical and mental health of our students and colleagues and, when schools leave little time for relationship building because of the exigencies of schedules, testing, and endlessly structured activities, there is little time or opportunity for relationships to flourish. We recognize that because there have been cases of abusive relationships among staff members and between staff and students, the entire idea of an adult-student relationship may be threatening or even scary. Thus, we consider the components of safe and meaningful relationships. Unsafe relationships are manipulative and dangerous. Safe and meaningful relationships are those that demonstrate unconditional support for our students and colleagues in

which they know they are accepted and supported even when they make mistakes. We then turn our attention to common mistakes in relationship building. Students know a phony a mile away, and when formulaic relationship-building activities are implemented in schools within an environment that is threatening, humiliating, and shaming, we should not be surprised if students are skeptical to think that a packaged game or exercise will fix that.

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Next, we consider common threats to relationships, and in the third decade of the 21st century, there is no greater threat than that of the bombardment of dopamine provided by technology when a student sits alone in the dark with a device, devoid of human interaction. The second-by-second reinforcement of these interactions literally alters the brains of students and leads them to be disinterested in something as boring as a human who fails to provide the likes, emojis, and other forms of reinforcement that their nonhuman technology companions can provide.

Teachers and administrators cannot bear responsibility for relationship building alone. There is a critical role that student leaders must play in this vital element of school life. We're not just talking about team captains and class presidents, but about the web of informal student leaders who can have a powerful impact—for good or ill—on school culture. Finally, we consider how school leaders and teachers can dramatically improve the quality of adult relationships. Even in a time that is overwhelmingly busy, with shortages of teachers, substitutes, and bus drivers, there are specific things that educators can and must do to demonstrate their commitment to safe and effective relationships in every school. At the end of the chapter, we offer specific suggestions about what readers can do now—today—to strengthen relationships in your building.

THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF RELATIONSHIPS

The positive impact of student-teacher relationships on the long-term academic and social development of students is well established in the scientific literature (Rimm-Kaufma and Sandilos 2010). As a result of the pervasive school closures during the global pandemic, teachers also saw first-hand the impact of the absence of relationships. Although many teachers and school administrators worked exceptionally long hours and schools invested billions of dollars on technology to link students to their schools, the vast majority of students did not establish and maintain the relationships necessary for a positive learning environment (Hari 2022). Even students with superior technology proficiency, such as those studying at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), required what their professors called human time—the ability to interact with a three-dimensional human—that even some of the smartest college students on the planet may otherwise lack (Turkle 2016).

Part of the resistance to effective teacher-student relationships is the feeling that the most important adult-student relationship should be with families, not teachers. This is a false dichotomy. Certainly, parents are the first, most enduring, and most important teachers that children will ever have. Nevertheless, as children grow older, the conversations with a trusted teacher can be different in tone and content than the conversations they have with their caregivers. This is especially true of adolescents who may not be willing to have conversations about development, sexuality, and other challenging subjects with parents (Scherr 2020). Few people doubt the power of positive relationships for students and staff. The challenge is how to make these relationships safe, deep, and meaningful.

Jerome*, a ninth-grade student at Washington High School, used to love school. Before COVID-related school closures, he excelled in math and wrote prize-winning essays. The oldest of four kids, Jerome took pride not only in his

*The student examples in this book are authentic representations of both individual students and composites of more than one student. All of the names have been changed.

academic success but also as a provider for his siblings. Every month, he helped his mom with the rent as a result of his after-school and weekend job. Before his father died, Jerome promised him that he would be the “man of the house” even though he was only 12 at the time. Despite his academic success in middle school, high school has been rough. Ms. Shay, his English teacher, recognized Jerome’s great writing gifts. While he rarely turned in homework, Jerome was diligent and attentive in class and was able to complete responses to literature and persuasive essays quickly during the time Ms. Shay allowed students to work in class.

But algebra was a different story. For Mr. Knox, class periods were dominated by his lectures, and student success depended upon the completion of voluminous homework. Some of the concepts were familiar, as Jerome had mastered pre-algebra in middle school. But other concepts were bewildering, and when Mr. Knox asked, “Anybody got any questions?” it was very clear that the expected response was silence. One day, after failing a quiz, Jerome heard Mr. Knox say, “I can see we’ve got a bunch of real geniuses here,” and Jerome felt that the insult was directed at him. Mr. Knox continued, “I told you that you could come in after school, but none of you did, so if you failed, that’s on you.” Every day after school, Jerome was working, not playing video games or hanging out with friends, as his teacher imagined. As he heard Mr. Knox’s voice, Jerome’s temper got the better of him, and he shoved his books off his desk. “To the office!” ordered Mr. Knox. Jerome walked out, not to the office, but off the campus entirely, wondering if he should return.

If Ms. Shay was a positive influence and Mr. Knox was a negative influence, doesn’t it all balance out? In *The Power of Bad*, professor Roy Baumeister’s research is conclusive—bad memories overwhelm positive ones (Tierny and Baumeister 2019). The power of positive relationships is evident and the source of our greatest memories as teachers. Our best days as teachers and leaders are not only at school, but in the casual encounters years after, when students see us in the street, store, or public gathering and ask, “Do you remember me? You really made a difference in my life.” These are the relationship highs, and they are wonderful. But we fail to recognize relationship lows at our peril. A single Mr. Knox can poison a well of Ms. Shays.

The psychological research from Baumeister and colleagues is clear that we not only retain negative memories but persevere about them. When those negative experiences happen to several students, it causes what Boston College professor Belle Liang calls *co-rumination*, the phenomenon in which a mishap for one student can quickly become a catastrophe for a group of students.

THE COMPONENTS OF SAFE AND MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

The Search Institute suggests a framework for building and maintaining effective relationships. Although the framework was written with student-teacher relationships in mind, the elements of the framework could be applied to relationships throughout a school and district, whether it is among teachers and administrators, a cabinet, a family group, or a governing board. Some of the key components of the framework are the following, expressed from the point of view of the student or colleague with whom we are trying to build a relationship:

Show me that I matter to you.

Be someone I can trust.

Really pay attention when we are together.

Make me feel known and valued.

Show me you enjoy being with me.

Praise me for my efforts and achievements.

Push me to keep getting better.

Expect me to live up to my potential.

Push me to go further.

Insist that I take responsibility for my actions.

Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks.

Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

Guide me through hard situations.

Build my confidence and help me to take charge of my life.

Stand up for me when I need it.

Put limits in place that keep me on track.

Share power.

Treat me with respect and give me a say.

Take me seriously and treat me fairly.

Involve me in decisions that affect me.

Work with me to solve problems and reach goals.

Create opportunities for me to take action and lead.

Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.

Inspire me to see possibilities for my future.

Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.

Introduce me to people who can help me grow.

Source: Search Institute 2018. The Developmental Relationships Framework is copyrighted by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN (www.searchinstitute.org) and used with permission.

These ideas are equally applicable to kindergarten teachers helping students navigate their first experiences at school and to the principal helping teachers deal with the complex and sometimes bewildering challenges of our profession. The through-line of all these ideas is respect and decency. It is not the absence of limits and rules, but rather the use of expectations that are not always dependent upon external authority. We have seen too many school leaders extol the values of teacher-student relationships, and then make decisions without involving teachers that struck some of them as arbitrary and capricious. Similarly, we have seen schools in which students are expected to learn from mistakes and bounce back from them, but where classroom observations are mechanistic and evaluative, with little or

no input from the classroom teacher who is being observed. In other words, the same consideration about learning from errors is not extended to their teachers.

The fundamental conclusion is that we know that quality relationships with students have a profound and lasting impact on their social and academic success. Moreover, we know how to develop and sustain those relationships. But those efforts will fail if we do not recall that engagement, and the relationships on which engagement depends, must be predicated on a system that places equal importance on trust and respect among adults. Without that, we can't expect that teachers will have the capacity to do the same toward students.

COMMON MISTAKES IN RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Whenever we hear a school leader giving a speech about the importance of relationships and commitment in schools, we are struck by the irony. If relationships were really that important, wouldn't a conversation be a better format than a speech? It's not unlike what happens in universities when we advocate fiercely for the value of collaborative learning, and then require doctoral students to write a dissertation on that subject entirely alone. The biggest mistake we have observed in relationship building is when the actions of leaders do not match their rhetoric. You don't build relationships with students and colleagues with a tool kit, workshop, or speech. You build relationships by taking the risks required to engage directly with students and colleagues.

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It all starts with the name. We know principals of schools with more than 1,000 students who make it a daily discipline to engage students by name. They are always in the hallways

during passing periods and in the bus lane or pickup area at the beginning and end of every day. They leave no doubt that a heavy class load, even when some secondary teachers may have 180 students during the day, is never an excuse for not knowing the name of every student. They also make a point of knowing something about them, and in particular, they build relationships with students who sometimes are more comfortable being anonymous. It's easy to have a relationship with the Superintendent's Advisory Committee, the National Honor Society members, or the captains of championship athletic teams. The challenge of relationship building is more complex for the students who glide through the hallways, avoiding eye contact with peers, teachers, and administrators. They sit in the back of the class, rarely cause trouble, and value those easy days when they are never called upon because they never raise their hands or otherwise call attention to themselves.

This environment leads to another common mistake in building relationships with students. Well-intentioned adults assume that the students just want to be left alone. As we heard one teacher say, "We have an agreement—we don't make them work too hard if they don't make us work too hard." It's a sullen truce, a joyless environment, and few people take the risk of opening a dialogue if it might be uncomfortable. Anyone who has taught or parented adolescents has experienced the monosyllabic replies to the usual litany of questions:

How was school? *Fine.*

Make any friends? *No.*

Anything interesting happen? *No.*

Have any homework? *A little.*

Worried about anything? *No.*

The mistake we make is to accept that this life of solitude, isolated from friends and teachers, is what the students really want. The truth is that students of all ages, and especially adolescents, crave to be known, noticed, and cared for. In one major metropolitan school system, we interviewed students who had

dropped out. Said one student, “I just stopped coming—and nobody noticed. Nobody even called my mom for more than three months. They didn’t care if I was there or not.”

The greatest threat to relationships in any school is the unwavering specter of evaluation, with students valued only for their test performance and teachers only valued for their ability to conform to the latest edition of the checklist that administrators use to evaluate—and evaluate and evaluate. Since the advent of No Child Left Behind in 2001 and its successor legislation, the prevailing theory among state departments of education has been that teachers and students can be evaluated into success. That hypothesis, having been tested for more than two decades, is, to put it mildly, unsupported by the evidence. While we understand the need for policy makers to understand how students are progressing, the use of student evaluation as a club rather than a diagnostic tool has led to a climate of fear that pervades nearly every school in the spring of each year. Similarly, teacher evaluation systems have consumed hundreds of millions of dollars and untold hours of time, with no evidence to suggest that any teacher was ever evaluated into more effective professional practices. This situation has created an atmosphere that is the opposite of effective relationships, with students fearing teachers, teachers fearing administrators, and conversations about teaching and learning that might have been constructive instead becoming adversarial, combative, and unproductive. There are far better alternatives to make teacher observation and student data analysis more effective, replacing evaluation with coaching (Marshall and Marshall 2017). A globally recognized leader in teacher observation, Kim Marshall makes the powerful case that the extremes of evaluation as a threat or, just as bad, the complete absence of meaningful classroom observations, fails to advance the cause of improved teaching and learning. Rather, frequent observations, with very specific feedback, along with the opportunity for the teachers to use the feedback to improve, lead to collaboration and a spirit of collective improvement—precisely what is needed to maintain strong relationships. In *The Progress Principle*, Harvard Business School professors make the compelling case that we

are far more engaged and motivated with indications of very frequent—even daily—progress, than by the yawning gap that typically separates performance from feedback (Amabile and Kramer 2011). We are seeing teachers jettison 40-item unit tests, often administered weeks after the relevant lessons were presented, with daily mini-assessments of two or three items, daily checks for understanding, with immediate feedback to students. These techniques transform feedback from an accusation into an opportunity for dialogue, learning, and, most importantly, progress.

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The final common mistake in building and maintaining relationships is that we give up when the going is tough. Any reader who has been in a serious adult relationship for more than about two weeks understands that relationships are hard, and ecstasy can turn to acrimony in a moment and sometimes over something trivial. Similarly, the star student who is diligent and compliant can, in the space of a weekend, turn glum, defiant, and disengaged. The colleague who always volunteers in a staff meeting to share ideas can become silent and seething with anger, the source of which is a mystery. Our impulse in these cases may be to just give students and staff the space and isolation that they appear to want. Perhaps that is appropriate, but if we do not inquire, if we don't take the time to learn the source of these changes, then we are inserting our own presumptions in the place of facts known only to those students and colleagues. Saying to the suddenly silent person, "Hi—I wondered if we could talk for a minute," might lead to an essential conversation or it might lead to them storming off in a rage. In education, it's worthwhile reminding ourselves that if it were easy, somebody else would be doing it.

STUDENT LEADERSHIP: THE SUPERGLUE OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

While we believe that the greatest degree of responsibility for relationship building rests with teachers and school leaders, we also know that excluding students from shared responsibility for relationship building is an inherent contradiction. The students are not empty vessels into which we pour our empathy, wisdom, and relationship skills. When students take the lead—not just in typical sports or clubs, but in a variety of activities, ranging from newly invented groups devoted to activism, cooking, exploration, technology, and as many ideas as the minds of students can create—then the admonitions of adults are replaced with the voices of peers. “You missed the meeting yesterday—we need you here!” is more powerful coming from a peer than the orations on the value of attendance and diligence that adults might provide.

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The evidence on the power of student leadership is striking. It is not surprising that students who are involved in extracurricular activities have better academic performance, attendance, and behavior than students who are not engaged in any of these activities. What is surprising is the greatest impact of student engagement in extracurricular activities is not with the three-letter athlete or two-club president, but with the completely disengaged student. That is, when students went from zero activities to just two during the year, their grade-point averages jumped by almost two full points, from D to B level grades. But when students increased participation from four activities to five, six, seven, or more, the impact was negligible (Reeves 2021c). We have also seen schools making a decisive commitment to broaden student leadership opportunities beyond the most popular or vocal students. One fifth-grade classroom has

a new class president every week. Other schools, in reaction to student resistance to joining clubs or activities, moved club meetings to the middle of the school day, during and adjacent to lunch periods, so no one was excluded for lack of after-school transportation or the requirements of sibling care or jobs. Finally, we cannot avoid noticing that there are schools where 100% participation in extracurricular activities and student leadership opportunities is commonplace. In small rural schools, every single student is needed not just for the athletics teams, but for service clubs, music, and drama—every single student has a role to play outside of the classroom. The other place where we find 100% student engagement in extracurricular activities is in elite independent schools, where parents routinely pay tuition in excess of \$50,000 per year. We don't begrudge these parents their economic success, but we do wonder, why is it that rich kids routinely receive leadership and extracurricular activities that are available to only a fraction of similarly capable students in the vast majority of public schools? If engagement and relationships are important for the children of wealthy families, do students in other schools deserve any less?

ESTABLISHING, RESTORING, AND MAINTAINING STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

Teacher and administrator turnover was increasing at an alarming rate before the global pandemic (Phillips 2015; Reeves 2018). After two years of the physical and mental toll associated not only with COVID, but also with community protests for and against masks, for and against school re-openings, and for and against a range of books and curricula, many teachers have had enough. The turnover rate of teachers, which was 8% in 2018, has risen to over 20% in many areas. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, around 600,000 teachers in public education quit between January 2020 and March 2022. In New Mexico, half the superintendents are in their first year, and our observation of the national trend is that senior leaders and board members are unwilling to continue to accept the public abuse and threats

to themselves and their families that are all too common. In this climate in which bullying, abuse, and threats are normalized, how can leaders establish relationships among the staff that are positive and encouraging?

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The advice earlier in this chapter about building positive and respectful relationships with students applies equally well to every teacher and administrator. Teachers need to know, for example, that administrators will have their back when a student reports to a parent or, incredibly in some states, to an anonymous tip line, that the teacher is expressing an idea that is not on the required script. We must not only tolerate divergent thinking but expect it—even assign it—so that students and staff members are comfortable with civil discourse. In staff meetings, debates about choices in curricula, schedules, and other activities should be vigorous and respectful. When the decision is made, it will always be a better informed and wiser decision as the result of discussion rather than silent assent (Beshears and Gino 2015).

One important way that leaders can build relationships with staff members is to radically reconstruct the way that meetings are conducted. When we interviewed a principal who was able to have common formative assessments, collaborative scoring, and a host of other professional learning activities that other principals in the same district claimed were impossible, she explained simply, “I haven’t had a staff meeting for three years.” She did have meetings—they were part of the schedule and bargaining agreement. But she never read aloud announcements to staff members and never allowed meetings to be diverted into grandstanding. Every meeting was purposeful and screamed respect for teachers and the time that they needed to be effective. Whenever we hear leaders claim that “they don’t have the time” for an essential practice, we know it to be a factually untrue statement because every school on the planet has the same number of hours in the day, and

every school within a district has an almost identical schedule. The difference is not the time available, but the leadership choices—or the leader’s default to historical choices made many years before—about how to use that time. Similarly, cabinet meetings (usually the senior leaders in the district)—often the single most expensive meeting in a district—can be radically transformed with a commitment to use those meetings for deliberation and inquiry rather than presentations (Reeves 2020b).

We know some schools that devote time monthly to wellness checks—checking in on the staff and their families. Sometimes these are private conversations and other times shared with a group, but no meaningful professional learning will take place when staff members feel that their leadership is indifferent to the health of teachers and families. We know of school leaders who have a daily ritual of one-to-one appreciation of staff members. These are not trophies presented in ceremonies, but individual and meaningful acts of appreciation—perhaps a word, a short note—the sort of thing that will linger long after the general and unspecific “thank you” to a group would have evaporated.

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Leaders will be forgiven for many mistakes, but if they lack credibility and trust, their expertise in every other leadership domain is without value.

While most of our discussion of staff relationships has focused on school-level relationships among teachers and school administrators, there is also important evidence on how relationships between district offices and schools can support, or undermine, school performance. While it is hardly news that trust, innovation, and efficacy are vitally important for student and school performance, a study found that the forces that undermined these three key attributes were most likely at the central office level rather than the schools (Daly et al. 2015). Even when efficacy—often cited as one of the most important variables influencing student achievement—was strong, a lack of trust at the highest levels of the organization

undermined the impact of efficacy on student achievement. This is consistent with the large-scale study on credibility that concluded that leaders will be forgiven for many mistakes, but if they lack credibility and trust, their expertise in every other leadership domain is without value (Kouzes 2011). The relationship-damaging mistrust that leaders engender is not necessarily deliberate. But the casual statements such as “We value innovation and it’s okay to make mistakes!” are undermined when mistakes in pursuit of innovation lead to punishment or humiliation. Skillful teachers know that they must adapt to the daily conditions of the classroom and their students, but if they fear that deviations from the script will lead to sanctions, then don’t expect those skillful adaptations, turning on a dime to meet the needs of a student or seizing a creative opportunity to drive home a lesson, to occur.

WHAT TEACHERS AND LEADERS CAN DO NOW



In order to optimize connections—the first key to engagement—consider these ideas that you can implement immediately:

1. Create “human time” in every classroom. This means no devices, even if brought from home, no earphones, and no other diversions. Everyone, including the teacher, attends personally to the discussion at hand, in pairs, small groups, and whole class. Try it for just 45 minutes. If they can do this at MIT, you can do it in your school.
2. Establish the expectation that every staff member, from the newest teacher to the most veteran principal, knows the name of every student and knows something about that student aside from their class performance and most recent test score.

3. Ask three students, “How do you know that your teachers and administrators care about you as a person?” Then just listen. Don’t suggest answers. Just listen.
4. Transform staff meetings into a time to get real work done. Never make verbal announcements to college-educated adults who can read them or get them in a Vimeo or voice mail. Change the format and purpose of cabinet meetings to require effective inquiry and decision making and not be a captive audience for senior leaders.
5. Get a list of students in your school who are involved in nothing—no clubs, sports, or other activities—and create a plan to invite them to engage in at least one activity this week. If you need to establish some new clubs and games, then do so.

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