

RELATIONSHIPS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

*Connect with your students and
help them build social, emotional,
and academic skills*

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Introduction

It was Spirit Week at school and everyone had their hair done up for Wacky Hair day. Students were placed in working groups for a science lesson to learn more about plants and how they helped our communities. I stopped at one group to start a conversation with a student; he wasn't participating in the group work and was sitting back and uninvolved. I looked at this student and he looked back at me. I couldn't tell if he was just uninterested or if he expected me to scold him for not being involved with his group. His eyes were glazed over and his affect was flat—but not his hair, which was spiked up. I immediately thought of a way to engage him in a conversation: “I really like your hair. How did you get it so high?” His face opened up, and he smiled and proceeded to tell me how he had done his hair all by himself that morning. Then another boy in the group asked him what kind of gel he had used. A three-way conversation about making our hair stand up tall ensued. When the other student moved away to work on his group project, I asked the first student his name. As I tried to pronounce it, he corrected me; I repeated his name again correctly. This student and I had connected; the student appeared relaxed and was sitting forward in his chair. When I asked the student what he could do to help his group, he decided to draw a sun for the group poster. As the class continued, this student who looked like he hadn't wanted to talk to me before was all smiles and had lots to share with me each time I dropped in on his group.

I am writing this book to detail the dynamics of relationships; to show how a teacher can maneuver around the hurdles and road blocks that some students try to put in our way to stop this connection. With a lot of observation and figuring out what tactics work best with which students, teachers can build relationships with all of their students, those who always want to connect and equally those who like to stay off the radar and not be noticed.

I found out early in my teaching career that I could do a more thorough job in helping students achieve their best when I took the time to get to know my students and their families; students would become part of their own team. When students knew that I cared and was listening and trying to understand what was important to them, they would put extra effort into their work. My caring motivated my students to do their best and, even when they couldn't, they would try harder next time; they found positive benefits through trying. Parents would see their child's efforts and would have more meaningful conversations about their dreams and goals for their children; the parent and child were feeling connected

with the school. Through this a trusting relationship was built among the child, parent, and myself.

This connection with my students and their families has taught me a lot about walking in another person's shoes and trying to understand what it's like to live their life, remembering to tolerate differences by showing respect, using self-control even when I am upset, being fair to all my students and their families, doing the right thing, and showing kindness first. I have never met a child I haven't loved and a parent I can't be friends with. It's our job as teachers to find out what works best for each child and family. Each child's social and emotional learning goes hand-in-hand with his/her academic learning, and the classroom sets the scene for growth in each area. If we don't provide this opportunity for children to develop their social and emotional skills, we are missing the best opportunity to ensure children will grow up to be happy, grounded, knowledgeable adults. We must build the supports around students so they can learn to effectively communicate and work with their peers.

As a school we were taking time to highlight different challenges for children, such as anxiety and depression. It was part of our schoolwide goal of working at being tolerant. We had personnel from the Anxiety Clinic come in and involve three classrooms in a sharing circle. Students were given information about anxiety and depression, and then were encouraged to discuss and ask questions of the presenters. All of our students were mature in their listening and later in asking questions. They were confident in sharing their personal experiences that showed how people in their families suffered from the same or similar problems. When children were respected and given the opportunity to understand, they demonstrated that they took the discussion and sharing seriously through their valuable contributions.

My intent for this book is to take you into my classroom and show you how I work with students and their families, and how I access the daily supports of administration, staff, division, and community agency supports. Effort is put into modeling and designing opportunities for students to learn how to work together with classmates and adults in their lives, as their social and emotional learning is always connected to their academic learning. I have worked in five school divisions, and each division has provided a wealth of ideas, support, and energy to my students, their families, and myself. It's always exciting, pleasantly challenging, and forever rewarding. This book welcomes you to my world of connecting with students and their families and marks the beginning of our socio-emotional and academic journey together.

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The Other R in Education

I enjoy the beginning of each school year because I get to know a whole classroom of new students and their families. It's my job to know what my students are capable of, what's important to their families, and how to get my students working with each other. It's a journey we take together, always having lots of fun and accomplishing tons of learning. At the end of each year it's hard to say goodbye because my students are a respectful, hard-working team with parents who continually listen, support, and share their time and talents with our class.

A new student had moved into class; in his first week, during circle time, he would constantly pull equipment out and give the teacher a defiant smile when he was reminded to leave the materials in the cupboard. By the next week, his teacher had him sitting on a chair in the back row of the circle, away from the cupboard. He was able to sit for five minutes and not touch any objects or students around him. When he looked like he needed a break, his teacher would take him down the hall for a movement break, and then they would return to class again to finish the lesson. After circle time, a lot of one-on-one time was given to the student to develop his interests in the different learning centres and to help him feel a part of the class. This teacher had a positive but firm approach that supported her students in their learning. In return, students loved being in her classroom.

This book contains the scaffolding you will require to support your students in further developing the social, emotional, and academic skills essential to standing tall, being proud of ourselves, and positively connecting and including others in our lives. You will have a positive hand in creating our citizens of tomorrow with your students today.

In building community, children are active participants in learning how to connect with their peers and teachers in meaningful, real-life situations and further developing their academic skills. The teacher models roles for each student to play and, when they run into road blocks such as disagreements with their peers, they are given active support to figure out how to correct and improve their relationship difficulties; students can learn how to help other students resolve conflicts too.

Your Relationships with Students

Connecting with students starts from the moment you meet them and continues every day afterward, as positive relationships are built one day at a time. A colleague of mine considers acts of kindness, respect, and helpfulness as relationship currency that she and her students daily deposit into their relationship banks. She explains this process by telling the story of the Seven Trees. One of her high-school community initiative committees had a fundraiser and was able to purchase seven trees to beautify the front of the school. The trees were arriving that day at noon and my colleague needed seven strong people to dig the seven

Developing our students' social and emotional skills goes hand-in-hand with developing their academic skills; you can't do one without the other. Students develop their skills to a higher level if all three areas are included in their learning.

holes for the trees before they arrived at school. She had a great relationship with the hockey team; when she approached them and asked them if they could dig the holes for the trees, the students happily agreed. By noon that day there were seven large holes in front of the school waiting for the trees. Many years later she bumped into a former student, one of the boys who had helped dig the holes for the trees. He had since become a law enforcer and every time he passed his former high school he was reminded of the story behind those seven beautiful trees. He remembers the day his teacher asked his group to dig the holes for the trees; he has always been happy that he agreed. My friend had deposited enough into each of these students' banks that they were willing to help her out. You need to always be filling your students' relationship banks to develop a reciprocal relationship where there is give and take.

In order to connect you need to make a daily effort to talk with your students, listen to what's important to them, and be available to help when asked. And it's important that your students can count on you when your help is needed. That's the magic ingredient to building that relationship bank with your students—be available to help when they ask for your help or when you think they need your help. Always make time to talk about what kind of supports you are giving your students so they know that, even if they sometimes don't agree, they will respect your decision because you made the decision out of caring for them.

Relationships in the Classroom

Through building community, children are active participants in learning how to connect with their peers and teachers in meaningful, real-life situations. If you model respect, fairness, kindness, empathy, and tolerance, students can practice and appreciate these behaviors at school. As students run into road blocks, such as disagreements with their peers, you can give them active support to figure out how to correct and improve their relationship challenges.

Students can also learn how to help other students resolve conflicts; as they become confident with their new skills, they will independently help their classmates. By the end of each school year, every child has moved a few steps forward in understanding and demonstrating their skills in positively interacting with their peers and adults. Students will further appreciate their strengths, talents, and challenges because they feel cared for and safe in their school environment.

An autistic student was included in a class play describing how to care for plants; the play script was built around a small phrase that the child was comfortable in repeating. In another situation his educational assistant sat across from him in the circle and wrote key words on a whiteboard to remind this student how to sit and be focused; he was able to listen to the lesson for five minutes before he needed a movement break. Everyone was happy for his success because the students and adults were part of his classroom plan; students welcomed the opportunity to work with their peer.

It is helpful to get your students involved in sharing during class lessons. When a student teacher and her class were researching what schooling was like during pioneer days, students prepared their own interview list to find out what it was like for their parents when they went to school. I managed to be present when a

The moral intelligences of kindness, respect, empathy, fairness, self-control, tolerance, and conscience are emphasized in a responsive classroom. Research points to a strong link between academic success and social-emotional skills; these skills are stronger and longer lasting if combined together in a lesson, as it provides more connections for students to attach their ideas to.

student talked about her parent's experience going to school in Bangladesh. Her story opened our eyes to all the supports we presently have in our schools. We have running water and toilets; many of our school resources are available to use in our classroom free of charge; we either bus to school or don't have far to walk; our school will provide us a lunch if we can't afford to bring or buy one.

It's important to celebrate as a community as often as we can because everyone likes to have a party, assembly, or get-together to enjoy each other's company. All our celebrations are the result of our daily learning together in pairs, groups, and individually in the classroom or other learning environments. I was invited to attend a Kindergarten celebration lunch just before the holiday break. Students had prepared table decorations and name tags for each person. The teacher had made special cookies with her students with the support of educational assistants and parent volunteers. Parent volunteers spent the morning warming up the turkey, potatoes, gravy, and vegetables. The Kindergarten students invited their Grade 3 Buddies to enjoy lunch with them. Everyone had a special time eating the delicious treats and hearing what the students were planning for their holidays.

Involving Parents

It is important to welcome students' parents to their children's learning. In order to develop authentic relationships with students, always take time to nurture friendships with their parents. It's a three-way dynamic, in which the needs of the parent and child are joined with the teacher and the school community. When I connect with a student and his/her family, I get a clearer picture and deeper understanding of the child's talents and needs. I welcome the parents to a team that supports their child. Parents understand their children the best and have useful information to share with his/her teacher.

Conversations before and after class are helpful relationship-builders when dealing with parents and guardians. I found it heartwarming how a grandmother wanted to make a difference in her grandson's life. She didn't want him to deal with the issues her children had had as students and presently have as adults. This grandmother had an important job counselling others in her community; she was happy, confident, and grounded. She would be able to provide a stable environment for her grandson and was making sure he was receiving one. It was helpful to know her life story and what her goals were for her grandson.

I have worked with many wonderful parents and guardians over the years who have greatly enhanced their child's and the class's development. Parents love being active participants in their children's learning and always have special talents to share with the class. As the classroom teacher, you will decide how each parent can support classroom learning so your class runs smoothly and effectively. You can help each parent better understand their child's strengths and areas where they need extra help. Describe for them in detail what support networks are necessary for their child, and welcome these supports/personnel to the child's team; you will help the parent feel comfortable with all the members of the child's support team so everyone can work successfully together.

One of my students was constantly missing a lot of school. In conversations with her mother and through home visits, I found out that her daughter suffered from severe anxiety and would find every excuse to not go to school. Once I had developed a comfortable relationship with the student and her mom, they became open to meeting a local doctor who specialized in working with students with anxiety. They went for a few meetings and, with this support, the student started to attend school regularly every day.

Taking the time to share your classroom rules and how you plan to engage your students and their families into learning will likely win your administrator's support. Having excellent classroom management techniques makes your administrator's job easier.

Building the Teaching Community

As you work hard to develop your classroom team of students and parents, it is important that you include school administration, student services, educational assistants, and teaching colleagues as the core of your School Team. Each person plays a special role in supporting your student learning; remember to bring them onto your student, parent, and teacher team.

Clear, purposeful classroom management techniques are the key to ensuring that all your students are following your lead in and out of the classroom as you are directing their daily learning. It's important to arrange meetings with parents and administration to put together plans for students when they are in need of supports, and then to meet again to review the child's progress and whether changes are needed to the plan. It's important to listen to parents when they are sharing information about their child. We have to make sure we fulfill the promises made at our team meetings and, if we can't, we need to take time to discuss the situation. This sharing and discussing builds trust between the teacher, parent, and child.

My Community Team consists of curriculum coordinators, behavior and hearing specialists, and the school support team of social worker, psychologist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, and speech and language clinician. These people take our student programs to a higher level where we know through assessments and observations exactly where our students shine and where they need extra help.

Working Together

See Chapter 7 for an extended example of School and Community Teams working together, documenting an initiative on including Aboriginal perspective in daily curriculum teaching.

When you take the time to work closely with your students and their families, and work collaboratively with your colleagues, staff, and divisional and outside agency supports, you will find that you end up with a lot of exciting projects in your classroom and in your school as a whole. When you have a purpose for learning and work as a community to fulfill this purpose, you end up constantly being involved in planning committees for improving student learning, getting to know and celebrating your school diversity, and finding the many ways that children can show their understanding the best.