

# Five Practices for Caring School Climates

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**By David Streight**

Four important meta-analyses have looked for key strategies for fostering the development of character. In the earliest, Richard Catalano and colleagues identified 25 effective “positive youth development” programs (Catalano et al., 2002). Six constructs stood out above others as goals in the programs studied by the Catalano team: competence (acquisition of social, emotional, and other skills); self-efficacy (the sense of one’s capability of accomplishing a task); prosocial norms (explicit emphasis on healthy standards); opportunities for students to interact positively with peers, teachers, and other adults; adult recognition of positive behaviors; and bonding (attachment and commitment to others).

Shortly thereafter, Marvin W. Berkowitz and Melinda Bier at the University of Missouri-St. Louis published their review of “what works in character education” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005) looking at 33 programs for youth development documented by sufficiently rigorous studies to offer evidence of their effectiveness. In their summary, Berkowitz and Bier honed the results to nine practices, showing significant overlap with Catalano and his colleagues’ findings: professional development, positive peer interaction (Berkowitz and Bier specifically cited peer discussion, role play, and cooperative learning), direct teaching about character, teaching social and emotional skills, making the character education agenda explicit, family and/or community involvement, providing models and mentors, integrating character education into the academic curriculum, and using a multi-strategy approach.

Meta-analyses like these do not readily allow for specificity in their summary areas, which means that classroom educators and school administrators eager for excellence and aware that relationship building is a goal of paramount importance are still stymied by the lack of practical answers to the how question: How does the school wishing to create a caring community proceed with relative assurance of making a difference?

The reality is that fields like moral development, education, and parenting have provided strong evidence for practices that foster social growth, concern for others, empathy and “community.” Moreover, the strategies—teaching skills of interpersonal relationship, fostering a sense of autonomy, eliminating inter-student competition in the classroom in favor of cooperative goal structures, adult responsiveness to student needs, and providing appropriate structure—stand out in a variety of different realms.

(A section here has been excised. It contained brief introductions to the practice & specifics of cooperative learning; to Diana Baumrind’s parenting studies; to SEL, and to Self-Determination Theory)

**Past Research relative to the “how” question**

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Though emerging from very different origins, certain key aspects of the four fields just noted—SEL, cooperative learning, authoritative parenting, and self-determination theory—have already shown considerable overlap with one another. It is this overlap, woven throughout a considerable corpus of research with results pointing strongly to healthier, more prosocial, more positive relationships in young people, that suggests the power behind five strategies for fostering relationships at school. At least two other research-based, somewhat similar, lists have been compiled in the past. One of these lists, by Marvin Berkowitz and John Grynych (1998), cited five parenting practices that maximize the chances of raising moral children, meaning children who in addition to having good self esteem and being appropriately compliant, have a strong conscience, have good moral reasoning skills, are empathic, and are altruistic. The five practices identified by Berkowitz and Grynych include nurturance and support, demandingness, positive modeling, democratic family decision-making and discussion, and induction. The last of these terms refers largely to respectful interactions with children (often but not always in disciplinary situations) where the adult’s purpose is to raise children’s awareness of how their behavior affects others. Some aspects of induction include social and emotional skills, like those of taking another’s perspective and teaching behaviors that may be more acceptable than others, depending on the circumstances.

A second list was drawn up by Richard Solomon, Vic Battistich, Dong Il Kim and Marilyn Watson at the Developmental Studies Center (DSC; Solomon et al., 1997). The DSC team took data from observations of 232 elementary classrooms and from student questionnaires in search of the answer to a version of the “how” question posed earlier: Which teacher classroom practices are most closely linked to students’ sense of the classroom as a community. Like the present paper and Berkowitz and Grynych (1998), Solomon and his colleagues identified five practices: emphasis on prosocial values, elicitation of student thinking and expression of ideas, encouragement of cooperation, warmth and supportiveness, and reduced use of extrinsic control. These five behaviors were found to correlate with student engagement, influence, and positive behavior, and these, in turn, were related to students’ sense of community. The amount of congruence between these two lists is considerable, as is the congruence of both with the five practices about to be outlined.

Why a third list, in light of at least two others based on good research? The primary reason is that nearly two decades have passed, and the research base is now considerably larger, and perhaps more specific. It may be fair to say that, had the same research teams gathered today to answer their same questions, their results would not be precisely the same. The field of SEL, for example, is generally considered to have come into existence only in the mid-1990s (Weissberg et al., 2015), and we have a far deeper understanding of social and emotional competence today than we did even in the late 1990s when these lists were drawn up. The modeling and induction (especially empathy induction) recommended by Berkowitz and Grynych (1998) are powerful practices for both parents and teachers to incorporate in rearing children, but the authors’ focus was more on moral development than specifically on social development, and thus it should be expected that some practices would differ, even beyond those that have come to light through the passage of time.

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There is greater congruence between Solomon et al. list (1997) and our list here, as would be expected by virtue of their questions are nearly identical. The greatest difference in the two is the Solomon et al. emphasis on prosocial values, with no mention of skill teaching. Not to discount the benefits of emphasizing prosocial values, the research corpus on social and emotional learning and skill development, today, has far surpassed that of emphasis on values as an effective practice. The other differences are minor, including subsuming both the DSC team's "reduced use of external control" and "elicitation of student thought and ideas" into autonomy support (see, in regard to free expression of thought and ideas as an autonomy supportive practice, Assor et al., 2002; Reeve, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2009).

### **Five Strategies for Relationships**

#### **Strategy 1: Structure learning and activities with cooperative goals**

##### **Eliminate Mandatory Competition**

Cooperative learning, which David Johnson and Roger Johnson (2009) have called "[now] one of the most successful and widespread applications of social and educational psychology to practice," has shed decades of light on the destructiveness, both academically and socially, of a climate of competition in the classroom. What cooperative learning tells us about good relationships is essential information for schools intent on fostering a caring climate.

Competition can be a healthy, growth inducing, rich experience if the individuals involved see the competition as an opportunity to test their skills, and if the competition is entered into freely. When competition is coerced or imposed, especially when its purpose is perceived by participants as demonstrating the superiority of one person over another, competition has several detrimental effects. Johnson and Johnson have pointed out that the latter kind of competition—which David Light Shields refers to as "decompetition"—leads to decreased levels of effort, to lower self esteem, and to ego-defensive avoidance of tasks, especially when a significant difference in ability is perceived between those competing (D.W. Johnson & Johnson, 1989, ch. 5; see also D.L. Shields & Shields, 2009).

The 148 independent studies analyzed by Roth, Johnson, and Johnson (2008) involving over 17,000 middle school students, looked specifically at the issues of academic achievement and the promotion of "positive peer relationships." When comparing situations where "cooperative goal structures" were in place—as opposed to competitive or independent goal structures—their meta-analysis showed resoundingly not only that students form more positive relationships when their learning goals are cooperatively structured but that their levels of academic achievement also rise.

Most importantly, as illustrated in the examples cited above (regular education students mixing with handicapped students, increased multi-ethnic interactions throughout the day), the non-competitive, group-oriented interactions students engaged in with cooperative learning appear to set the stage for more harmonious relationships in the classroom and beyond.

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### **Strategy 2: Add Appropriate Structure to Classroom Activities and Assignments**

#### **Make sure students understand and agree with standards, structure and expectations**

Though standards, expectations, and structure may sound out-of-place in the context of relationships, the evidence for their beneficence is as ubiquitous as it is remarkable, as it figures prominently in at least three of the four realms just noted: parenting practices, cooperative learning, and self-determination theory. Two points are to be highlighted. The first is that structure (in which standards and expectations are factors) is essential for optimal social growth, but structure being in place is not enough without a second requirement; for optimal benefit, expectations, standards, and structures must be perceived by students as reasonable and fair. If people, of any age, do not understand the limits that are to guide and circumscribe their behavior, or if they do not agree with those limits, such limits will be of little use in fostering a positive climate.

#### **Structure in Parenting practices**

Structure figures prominently in Baumrind's research regarding young people becoming self-regulated (agentic), on the one hand, and other-oriented and prosocial (communal), on the other. Demandingness, one of the two axes in the authoritative parenting paradigm, is a combination of monitoring the children under one's care, and control. It is monitoring side of demandingness "which provides structure, order, and predictability to the child's life" (Baumrind, 2013, p. 27). Responsive love and nurturance are essential, but regardless of how much love and nurturance an adult provides, the best child outcome does not emerge without structure and order, without the child understanding the parameters of behavior that help define, and confine, his or her sphere of activity and influence.

Baumrind's parenting recommendations are seconded by Rochester University researcher Judith Smetana, much of whose work focuses on adolescents. In a 2008 article addressing six recommendations for fostering "good kids," Smetana's first item is that parents should "set standards and expectations high" (Smetana, 2008). She adds, again in agreement with Baumrind, that in addition to setting limits, the most effective parents "provide reasons or rationales for their expectations: rationales that go beyond 'because I said so!'"

To differentiate structure from control, the latter is an adult's attempts to keep children from crossing the line over into territory that is either harmful or inappropriate, while the former explains both where the line is and why the line is set where it is, including why the other side of the line is inappropriate. In the context of a lesson or assignment, for example, when structure is set appropriately students are clear about what they are supposed to do, what they are supposed to be learning or otherwise accomplishing, and a broad array of other details that help them complete the assignment as expected, without heading down blind alleys. "Write about an experience in your life where you learned an important lesson," for example, will be a more meaningful exercise if a student knows the purpose of the assignment, its desired length, and perhaps even the style. A teacher who makes that assignment the first week of class may want to use it to assess the range of writing abilities in the class and to get to know students. If,

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on the other hand, students are told that the teacher wants to see their creative writing at its best, that they should create suspense to draw the reader into the event, then this aspect of structuring the assignment is essential, especially if creativity and suspense might be a factor in the way the teacher grades the assignment if it is to be graded.

### **Structure in cooperative learning**

According to the components of an effective cooperative learning program (D.W. Johnson & Johnson, 1989; D.W. Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1990a, 1990b) the academic and social effects do not accrue without both clearly understood expectations (regarding what students are to learn, how they are to work together, how they are to attend both to individual contributions and to group dynamics, and so forth) and considerable structure (e.g., size of the group, guidelines for group process, time constraints). Positive interdependence of the kind that fosters both academic and relational growth requires a level of “individual accountability.” Thus the comment cited earlier that group members cannot “hitch-hike” on the work of others (D.W. Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1990b, p. 13). The standards for the group must be met by all; and the structure dictates that “every group member is responsible for the final outcome” (p. 14).

The terms used by Baumrind, monitoring and structuring are actual chapter subheadings in Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec’s (1990a) users manual for cooperative learning, where the second chapter, “The Teacher’s Role in Cooperative Learning” deals almost exclusively with structure. The chapter’s three subheadings (beyond Introduction and Conclusions) are all structural: Formulating Objectives and Making Decisions; Structuring Tasks and Positive Interdependence; and Monitoring, Intervening, and Evaluating. In a later chapter where the authors troubleshoot issues, the solutions recommended are also primarily structural: if the problem is passive uninvolvement, “jigsaw materials so that each member has information the others need”; for active uninvolvement, the teacher should structure the task so that all members must work steadily and contribute in order for the group to succeed (p. 4:26). When the problem is a student working independently rather than interdependently, the recommendation is to structure materials such that the offending student cannot do the work without the other students’ information. When a student is taking charge, doing all the work or refusing to let others participate, “[restructure the group] so that other group members have the most powerful roles” (p. 4:27). Though the philosophical focus of cooperative learning is interdependence and much activity concerns learning the skills of interaction, neither is feasible without a clear structure that students are able to understand, and within which they can work.

### **Structure in Self-Determination Theory**

From the standpoing of SDT, the role in social health attributed to the structural recommendations just made was illustrated by Johnmarshall Reeve and Mark Halusic in an article for Theory and Research in Education (2009). Discussing teachers who foster autonomy and the way these teachers use structure in the classroom, Reeve and Halusic asserted that “compared to their more controlling counterparts, autonomy-supportive teachers actually

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provide more, not less, classroom structure” (p. 148, italic theirs). In their context, structure “refers to the extent to which teachers help students perceive strong and reliable associations between what they do during class (behaviors) and what happens as a result (outcomes)” . They offer three elements of structure:

- clear expectatons
- guidance along the way as students complete activities
- constructive feedback, referring to feedback that provides information in a non-controlling way (p. 148; for more on feedback from the context of SDT see Streight, 2015, chapter 6).

Reeve, often in collaboration with other SDT researchers, has looked carefully at the beneficial results when teachers support student autonomy and structure as complementary practices, and has demonstrated that the level of behavioral engagement students show in the classroom is highest when teachers both support autonomy and provide structure (e.g., Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Reeve et al., 1999, 2004). Specifically on the issue of relational benefits, Martin Vansteenkiste and colleagues looked at the combination of autonomy support and high expectations in Belgian high school students, noting that students who saw their teachers as low in autonomy support and low in clarity of expectations engaged in fewer self-regulation strategies, and generally reported themselves as engaging more often in aggressive and deviant behaviors than students whose teachers both supported their autonomy and were clear about their expectations (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012). Students who perceived their teachers to support only one of the two—autonomy or structure, but not both—fell in between the two extremes, suggesting that both fostering autonomy and providing structure are important for optimal school climate (as well as for optimal academic growth).

### **Strategy 3: Responsivity**

#### **Being There in times of need, to fill needs**

Much of the character and social development literature refers to the importance of warmth in relationships (e.g., Ryan & Powelson, 1991, p. 55; Lickona, 1992, p. 72, 75; Solomon et al., 1997). But child development researchers more often use the word responsivity (e.g., Baumrind, 2008, 2013; Smetana, 2009; Bowlby, 1958, 1982). It’s an issue of building trust, of being there in times of need so trust can build. Filling needs that support social health is central to both Baumrind’s “authoritative parenting” and to self-determination theory, but nowhere has the case been made as clearly as in works on attachment theory.

#### **Responsivity in Attachment Theory**

In the 1940s British psychiatrist John Bowlby began looking at the nature and origin of the child’s tie to the primary parent figure (Bowlby, 1958, 1982). He was joined later, and his theory about the power of filling the need for attachment was enriched, by Canadian Mary Ainsworth’s observations of mother and child interactions in Uganda. In times of need or fright, young children who sought their mothers, who found them, and who could count on the mother’s attention to the care they needed formed “secure attachments.” Those whose parent

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was less consistently available formed different degrees of “insecure” attachment. Marked differences were noted in the way securely attached children approached their environment, and those in it, relative to insecurely attached children.

Though the preponderance of research on attachment theory concerns infants and toddlers, Bowlby affirmed “that attachment behaviour does not disappear with childhood but persists throughout life” (1982, p. 350), and the quality of attachment was seen to affect the quality of relationships a child was able to form. The fact that attachment pertains also to the classroom—i.e., an adult important in a child’s life being reliably present to help fill a child’s needs—was illustrated in Marilyn Watson and Lauren Ecken’s book *Learning to Trust: Transforming Difficult Elementary Classroom Through Developmental Discipline* (2003; see Appendix I in the book for a concise introduction to Attachment Theory and its relevance to education). Watson and Ecken were focusing in large part, but not exclusively, on children’s needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence—academically as well as socially and emotionally. The growth that children made in regard to their attachment to Ms. Ecken, as well as their relationships with one another, was seen to depend largely on the extent to which Ecken managed to be responsive to those needs.

### **Responsivity in Parenting Practices**

The same concept of filling needs, one of which is the need to have a nurturing adult available, has been one of Baumrind’s two primary pillars that determine the quality and effectiveness of parenting. The complement to a structured demandingness is responsivity, which Baumrind defines as “how parents express love, balance their children’s needs for protection and autonomy, and comply with their children’s needs” (2008, p. 18). Children raised with an authoritative parent end up with a greater “drive to be of service to others and to engage collaboratively with them”; they are more “prosocial and cooperative” (2008, p. 17).

### **Responsivity in Self-Determination Theory**

Being responsive to needs and its effects on social health, well-being, and prosocial behavior is the primary thread running through self-determination theory. SDT focuses primarily on the way that filling needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence seems especially to lead to “growth and integration, as well as... constructive social development and personal well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000b; see also Ryan & Deci, 2000a, Deci & Ryan, 2000). Though the focus is more on the way needs are met, and the importance of their being met, than on the timing that was important to Bowlby, and perhaps Baumrind, the research corpus behind SDT overwhelmingly supports the power for positive growth that is fed by need fulfillment. Few specific recommendations can be offered for the “how” of being there in times of immediate need, because when those times arise is complicated—sometimes impossible—to predict. The bottom line in regard to how filling needs pertains to education seems to be that students must perceive adults at school as being there for them, as adults they can turn to in times of need.

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Though responsivity is the focus here, it is not meant to diminish the value of warmth. However, when children have needs, it is responsivity that fills those needs. In the ideal situation the two work together, but in the long run responsivity probably has the higher valence. When Solomon's team of researchers added supportiveness in their term "warmth and supportiveness," and when Berkowitz and Gryncz chose "nurturance and support," the terms these researchers chose were alluding to something beyond warmth.

### **Strategy 4: Teaching the Skills of Relatedness**

SEL's increasing presence in schools is due in large measure to the accumulation of evidence that teaching young people certain skills has myriad positive effects (e.g., Durlak et al., 2010, 2011, 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2004). Much of this work has been done under the auspices of CASEL, whose recommendations are broader than just relationship skills (our specific subject here) but in this latter category the Collaborative's recommendations include :

- 1) the skills of establishing relationships (e.g., making friends, starting conversations)
- 2) the skills of maintaining relationships (e.g., reciprocal sharing, how to apologize, how to negotiate the ways time or toys might be spent)
- 3) the skills of resisting inappropriate social pressure (e.g., how to suggest alternate activities, how to deflect attention from a situation that could turn bad, how to say no firmly but kindly)
- 4) how to resolve conflicts constructively
- 5) how to seek help when needed (timing, choice of words, etc.)
- 6) how to offer help appropriately and constructively (e.g., recognizing the difference between a friend who is struggling with something and a friend who needs help to resolve the struggle; how to offer help without the other feeling obligated or belittled) ([casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/core-competencies/](http://casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/core-competencies/)).

Mastering skills, and having the confidence that the skills will work in one's favor, leads not only to academic success but also to the social health that a caring school climate needs (Baumrind, 2009, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b; Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2009). The meta-analysis that Joseph Durlak and colleagues carried out on schoolwide interventions to teach social and emotional skills (Durlak et al., 2011) confirmed that SEL can produce significant positive effects regarding prosocial behaviors, as well as on students' attitudes toward both themselves and others.

The importance of fostering competence by teaching social, emotional, and other skills has been further bolstered through decades of research on both motivation and well-being by SDT researchers. Students who do not have their needs for competence filled are not as socially healthy as their peers. In discussing competence in the classroom, Christopher Niemiec and Richard Ryan remarked that students will only engage in, and personally value, activities they feel they have a chance of mastering. Their comment applied to social activities as well as to academics. In addition to the actual teaching of skills, Niemiec and Ryan recommend that the feedback given to students downplay evaluation and focus primarily on information that can help students develop further competence (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).



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## Teaching skills in Parenting

Similarly, the “optimal competence” in Diana Baumrind’s ideal for children requires self-regulation skills (of being assertive but not overly so) as well as those of obeying appropriate rules (without being obsequious): “children must...be assertive but not disruptive or defiant, and compliant but not submissive or obeisant” (2013, p. 26). Baumrind’s work focuses more on the broad strokes of parent-child interactions than on the details, but parents need to help their children learn the requisite skills of both agency and communion.

## Teaching skills in Cooperative Learning

The skills of relating also play significant roles in cooperative learning, as seen above in the fourth and fifth essential components of the practice. Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec specify at least seven skills (from 1991, 1:13) :

- 1) getting to know and to trust one another
- 2) the skill to communicate accurately and unambiguously
- 3) how to support one another
- 4) how to resolve conflicts constructively
- 5) how to assess group process in reaching its goals
- 6) the skills of maintaining effective working relationships
- 7) the skills of assessing and giving feedback to peers regarding which actions in the group are most helpful and which are less helpful in completing the group’s work (p. 1:13, 1:14).

## Teaching skills in Developmental Discipline

Learning skills plays an important role in Developmental Discipline, the strategy of classroom management and discipline most often recommended by moral and character development experts because of its focus on filling needs that lead to both self-regulation and a concern for the community (e.g., Berkowitz, 2012a, 2012b; Nucci, 2009; Watson, 2003, 2008; see also Streight, 2015). Misbehavior can take place for a variety of reasons; thus, the educator’s response should depend on his or her best assumption regarding the reason for the misbehavior (Watson, 2007). In some cases, children behave in inappropriate ways because they have not learned how to act, or react, in socially accepted ways. In such cases, sending the child to the office or mandating time-out is a less effective procedure than teaching the child an appropriate alternate behavior that might be more appropriate and socially rewarding. Teaching such skills thus helps foster relatedness at the same time that it diminishes behavior problems (and their aftermath if behavior is handled punitively).

## Strategy 5: Foster Autonomous Thinking and Acting Empower students in age-appropriate ways

For students to be both active participants in, and positive contributors to, a caring school climate, their contributions to that climate cannot be mandated; they must be undertaken

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wholeheartedly, and thus motivated from within. Wholeheartedness in actions results only when actions are deemed valuable or intrinsically interesting (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Reeve et al., 2004; Reeve, 2006). This is the realm of autonomy. The point is not solely that strong relationships at school need autonomous formation, however; fostering students' senses of autonomy is one way to build relationships (Ryan & Powelson, 1991; Hodgins et al., 1996).

Though the preponderance of research on autonomy at school speaks to academic benefits, we have already noted the relational importance of autonomy in Baumrind's observation that, for children to become both agentic and communal, parents must foster their autonomy; indeed, agency, in Baumrind's terminology, is a near synonym of autonomy. Similarly, and despite cooperative learning's focus on communal work, having cooperative goals requires that each student accept individual—autonomous—responsibility both for his or her own learning and for that of group mates.

Self-determination theory puts its focus even more squarely on autonomy, however, for both academic and social growth. In the early 1990's Richard Ryan and two colleagues at the University of Rochester showed that the quality of students' relatedness to teachers "contributed to most indices of school functioning," and at the same time they offered evidence that the quality of student relationships with teachers (and with parents) "was in large part a function of the degree to which those adults were perceived as autonomy supportive" (Ryan & Powelson, 1990, pp. 60-61).

**Applications of self-determination theory to education commonly address five ways for educators to support autonomy:**

### **1) Offer choice to the extent possible (Assor et al., 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2009)**

Part of autonomy concerns the amount of control individuals feel they have over their lives. In simple, yet sometimes significant ways, educators can thus help increase student perception of being autonomous when meaningful choices can be offered. For example, in the early stages of cooperative learning, when teachers are helping students understand the structure of working with cooperative goals, they might ask students to pick two or three topics from a list to work on, as a way of dividing students into groups. Offering some choice in the matter, rather than merely assigning students to groups, is an "autonomy supportive" strategy. Supporting autonomy by offering choice in no way diminishes classroom structure or the continuing need for structure; all the structure remains in place. Even though there are elements of academic life that can not left to choice, a normal classroom leaves lots of room for students to make choices.

### **2) Nurture student's inner motivational resources (Assor et al., 2002; Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Jang et al., 2010).**

As educators get to know students, they become attentive to what students' interests are. They learn what individual students like to do, what motivates them. Student interests do not always

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coincide with the academic requirements of school, but occasionally they do, or they can. The more educators can tap into these interests, and the more they can help students make connections between activities at school and their natural interests and skills, the more students are able to feel like what is happening at school is “theirs” and the more value they will perceive in the work to be done. The same factors that help educators be more attentive—thus more responsive—to students’ needs helps educators discern which aspects of students’ lives might lead to greater motivation.

### **3) Promote value and relevance for activities via explanatory rationales**

The term explanatory rationale refers to giving students an understanding of why something might be valuable or relevant to their lives. It helps students understand why they are being asked to invest effort in something. Johnmarshall Reeve and Mark Halusic (2009; see also Reeve et al., 1999) offer the example of a teacher saying “The reason I am asking you to do this is because...” (p 149). Offering a rationale that helps students understand why something might be valuable, helps students “buy into” the activity themselves. It helps make the activity more theirs, and thus autonomy is supported. For the purpose of building relationships at school, the explanatory rationale might sound like “I’m asking you to work with different partners today because I want you to look for ways that your interests or your work styles might overlap with those of someone you don’t know very well. Appreciating the good points in others is what we want our school to be all about.” An explanatory rationale for an apology is phrased similarly: “I know many of you were mad at Mr. Greene’s class because of what happened on the playground yesterday, but we were partially responsible. If we can be strong enough to apologize to them for our role in the misunderstanding, it might make it easier for them to admit responsibility for what they did. Maybe we can get this behind us and go on with the kind of school life we really want to have.”

### **4) Use informational, non-controlling language**

In 1996, researchers from Skidmore College and McGill University looked at how autonomy and relatedness affected one another in different kinds of relationships (Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996). They compared relationships characterized by autonomy support with relationships where one partner was perceived as controlling. Their conclusions in two different studies “showed that autonomy was significantly related to more positive and honest naturally occurring interactions, whereas control related to more defensive functioning” (p. 227). In a discussion of parental use of controlling language, Edward Deci and Richard Ryan related that parents who use conditional love as a disciplinary technique —thus requiring their children to give up their autonomy to retain parental love—led to children experiencing more generalized anger and resentment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; see also Soenens et al., 2008).

The counterpart to controlling language is informational language. In an educational context, informational language refers to feedback, to statements about expectations and standards, and to other utterances that are perceived by the student as information that will help lead to success rather than utterances via which the teacher appears to be coercing student behavior

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in favor of the teacher's preferences. Informational language helps establish structure, in that it provides "information that is needed for decision making and for performing the target task" (Deci et al., 1991, p. 342) at the same time that it fosters competence. It fosters autonomy because its lack of attempt to influence behavior allows the student more choice.

### **5. Acknowledge and accept student's expressions of negative affect (Reeve, 2006, Assor et al., 2002)**

When students struggle with understanding material, teachers often hear about it. How a teacher responds to such expressions affects students' senses of autonomy. "When teachers acknowledge, accept, and even welcome expressions of negative affect, they communicate an understanding of students' perspectives and put themselves in a position to receive students' negative emotionality as constructive information to transform an instructional activity from 'something not worth doing' (in the eyes of students) into 'something worth doing'" (Reeve & Halusic, 2009, p. 150). It is precisely the action of allowing the student to "own" his or her negative feelings that supports autonomy. An insecure or more controlling teacher may be tempted to "discipline" students for their negativity or to argue with the negative perspective. As when students are given choice, autonomy is supported when teachers allow—even encourage—"students' perceptions of having a voice" at school (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

Avi Assor with colleagues Haya Kaplan and Guy Roth at Ben Gurion University (Assor et al., 2002) looked at how teacher acceptance of negative affect in the classroom affected students. When they compared the practice with two other practices considered "controlling" (forcing meaningless and uninteresting activities rather than offering students choice, and intruding or intervening when students are engaged in activities) they found "criticism suppression" to be the practice that most led to negative feelings and lack of engagement in the classroom.

It is to be noted that Baumrind, also supports the notion of adults allowing for expressions of negative affect, and uses it as one of the distinguishing factors between authoritative parents, "who use reason and discussion to obtain compliance and are willing to negotiate when they deem their child's [appropriately expressed] objections to be unreasonable," and highly ineffective authoritarian parents who "insist on conformity to parental wishes in rigid and inflexible ways" (2009, pp. 20-21). In this sense, accepting negative affect can be a way of being responsive to students.

### **Conclusion**

The fact of offering the five strategies above is not to suggest the unimportance of a number of other factors that affect or even promote social growth, and ultimately school climate. The engagement, respect, and shared vision deemed necessary by the National School Climate Center ([schoolclimate.org/climate](http://schoolclimate.org/climate)), the SAFE acronym encouraged by CASEL for best implementation of social and emotional learning programs (Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit; [casel.org](http://casel.org)), and a number of other measures all add a positive valence to life at school.

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Similarly, if a school is not clean and safe (both physically and psychologically) the relationships that underlie a caring climate are in jeopardy.

In the same vein, the greater emphasis on the skills of social interaction than on the emotional and decision-making skills outlined by groups like CASEL is not to diminish the latter's importance in school, or in life; rather, given the purpose here to focus on fostering positive relationships, greater emphasis is placed on relational skills over other kinds of skills. The list of five practices here thus assumes a certain number of basics, to allow a more intense focus on specifics. The fact that all these practices 1) are easily implemented, 2) require little or no extra educational time, 3) have a strong research base for their effectiveness, and 4) pertain specifically to the question before us—what specific educator behaviors or strategies are most conducive to the “warm relationships” or the “caring school climate” called for?—should warrant their serious consideration and implementation in schools.

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