

Fostering Autonomy

*what research tells us about
the four best things a teacher can do
to nurture autonomy in students*

Autonomy is a key contributor to internalized motivation. Autonomy is a universal human need: it's the sense that we have a certain amount of say in what happens to us, that we have an appropriate amount of control over our lives. Take away autonomy and you take away both social development and zest for life. Decades of research show that autonomy-fostering teacher practices like the below increase both academic achievement and levels of kindness.

Respect "voice"

Invite student opinions. Show them that their opinions are respected. Of course, they must be expressed respectfully. If not, deal with the language/respect issue in the opinion's expression in such a way that respect for the opinion (and the human being who expressed the opinion) are evident. When students feel like their voices count, they make important strides toward social growth.

What happens when students express negative opinions toward the subject matter, the class, or even the teacher? Research suggests that this may be one of the most important things teachers can do to promote the development of autonomy. (Not that negative opinions should be encouraged, but that—when they do arrive—they are received with full respect.)

Make it relevant: explanatory rationales

One research study on fostering autonomy took its title from the findings: choice is good, but relevance is excellent. In fact, the leading researchers on autonomy assert that an action is never truly autonomous unless we grasp its meaning and worth. An explanatory rationale clarifies why the teacher feels it is important that students learn this material, or how it might be used, or why the material or the skill in question might be relevant to students' lives. The more students understand the meaning and the worth of academic material, the more they feel engaged and motivated to make it their own.

Offer choice

Students (and teachers, and administrators ...) have very little choice about lots of things at school. That being said, there are numerous occasions when choices can be offered. The more we can offer, the more students feel they have a say in what they're doing, and thus the more they are willing to buy into it.

Empower students: offer meaningful roles

Students feel more autonomy, and gain important skills for acting responsibly, when they are given meaningful roles to play, both at home and at school. The more we can allow students play such roles, the more they can participate in important (developmentally appropriate) activities, the more we foster their social-emotional and moral growth. What roles can they play? It's worth a brainstorming session with colleagues.

*For a deeper look at autonomy, its importance, and the research behind the principles above, see heartofcharacter.org
This page may be duplicated for educational purposes, with attribution to heartofcharacter.org*