

# Relationships at School

*what research tells us about*  
***the five best things a teacher can do***  
*to nurture a caring culture in classroom and school*

## **Work for cooperative goals**

Nothing saps energy from learning—or from being friendly to others—more than fear: fear of inadequacy, fear of being made fun of, fear of being a loser . . . One of the clearest findings about relationships at school is the way they degenerate as competition increases. How do we reverse the trend? First, eliminate competition in the classroom. Second, structure lessons such that helping one another is beneficial to students' learning. The evidence is strong that everything gets better when competition is diminished and a cooperative goal structure becomes the norm: more learning, higher test scores, better feelings about one another, higher levels of respect, fewer altercations, more prosocial interactions.

## **Offer appropriate, understandable structure**

Relationships improve and learning increases when students know that their teachers have both high standards and high expectations for behavior and learning. The icing on the expectations cake is structure: not regimentation, but clearly communicated, appropriately established guidelines. Educators who clarify what material needs to be mastered, what the standards of excellence are, how evaluation will take place, and other such parameters actually ease tension and confusion rather than add to it. The same is true for behavior: expectations should be similarly structured to help students learn, master, and use prosocial skills. It may sound counter-intuitive, but standards, expectations and structure—when perceived by students as both demanding *and* fair—help foster good relationships in measurable ways.

## **Be responsive to kids' needs**

Being responsive to kids' needs implies getting to know them. It doesn't happen any other way; learning about students and perceiving their true needs is an individual, deliberate, ongoing process. Some needs are universal—a sense of belonging, self-acceptance, the need to be appropriately challenged—but others are more subtle and specific to the individual. A teacher's warmth is important, but research points to responsiveness as even more powerful than warmth: the student's sense that "if I'm really in need, I know this adult will be there for me." That sense gets built through time and experience together, the result of all those moments when students felt their teacher understood them, cared, and was there for them.

## **Teach the skills of relating**

No set of skills is more important than the skills of relationship: being sensitive to others' needs, understanding personal space, entering into conversations, resisting inappropriate pressure, listening with respect for the person speaking, resolving interpersonal conflicts... Educators who make a difference are sensitive to how well students understand and can use these skills, and then teach them as needed. Being responsive to kids' needs means, in part, making sure students learn the skills to enrich their own lives and the lives of those around them.

## **Foster autonomy**

If our goal is a caring climate, then it's all about students feeling motivated to contribute to that climate: they're caring because they want to be caring, not because of outside motivators. In contrast, students who feel powerless have little interest in promoting the common good. Autonomy-supportive teaching practices are the fastest route to nurturing inner motivation—for academic as well as behavioral growth. Autonomy is fostered by explaining why we're doing what we're doing, demonstrating to students that their opinions are valued, offering choice, and giving students meaningful roles to play at school. Little actions of empowerment reap huge benefits for engagement and measurable results for cooperation and friendliness.

*See research documentation and further information on all the above at [heartofcharacter.org](http://heartofcharacter.org)  
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