

The Importance of Good Relationships between Student, Teacher

By Devon MacEachron, Ph.D.

One of the most deeply inspirational relationships is that of a devoted teacher and a willing student. Almost everyone has had a favorite teacher and, unfortunately, most of us have also had those we liked far less. My 2e daughter adored the teacher who, noting her skill at public speaking and love of reading, invited her to give a speech introducing a favorite author at a reading conference. My 2e son appreciated the teacher who talked with him as an equal, shared his own abundant enthusiasm for the subject, and made him feel they were peers in learning. Both children had other teachers who found their inattentiveness frustrating, their constant questions to be off-topic, and their poor spelling and handwriting to be migraine-inducing. Unfortunately my children remember them as well.

What causes us to harbor such powerful sentiments of respect and affection (or lasting dislike)? The answer is simple. It's the quality of the student-teacher relationship.

While positive student/teacher relationships are important to virtually all students, they are especially important for students who are "at risk." Twice-exceptional learners are at risk for underachievement, boredom, bullying, anxiety, depression, social disconnect-ness, being misunderstood, and being prone to daily frustration. Consequently, they can benefit enormously from caring teachers who understand and appreciate them.

A good school year can be the product of a relationship with a teacher who appears to like and bond with the student. A bad year can be the product of a

teacher who doesn't. Strong student/teacher relationships have been shown to increase student motivation, grades, social outcomes, and emotional well-being at every stage in the student's development, from early elementary school through college and graduate school.

A good relationship with even one caring teacher can literally change a student's life. We shouldn't rely on chance and hope that such a relationship will develop spontaneously, but rather can set the stage and take proactive steps to try to help it to happen.

There are three key players in the dynamic: teacher, student, and parent(s). All can influence the development of a positive bond between student and teacher.

What Teachers Can Do

Here are steps teachers can take to help develop a positive relationship with their 2e students.

Share some personal information. Talk about your own background (including academic and even social challenges you may have faced as a student), hobbies, and interests. Tell why you love teaching. Opening up helps you seem more approachable and sets the stage for the student to share some of his or her interests with you.

Make a deliberate effort to **get to know and connect with the student.** Find out about his or her background, interests, temperament, strengths, weaknesses, and academic levels. Try to construct learning activities to match the student's profile of strengths and weaknesses. For example, if a boy in

your classroom is very shy and appears engaged, but never raises his hand to answer questions, you might assess his level of understanding of a concept in a one-on-one conversation at the end of class.

Try to **spend at least some time individually** with the student. Doing so is important, not just to get to know the student, but also to establish and maintain trust and respect. Things that could embarrass the child should always be discussed in private rather than in front of the class. One teacher I know met privately with a student who had ADHD to brainstorm how to help her be less impulsive in class. They decided on a "secret signal" the teacher would subtly employ when appropriate.

Show that you care. Demonstrating concern and interest is one of the most powerful ways to build a positive relationship. In most cases, teachers do care, but sometimes they fail to find ways to effectively communicate this message. Ways to demonstrate caring include:

- Show an interest in the student's personal life.
- Watch for and touch base with the student when he or she displays strong emotions.
- Listen attentively and empathize.

Demonstrate pleasure and enjoyment in teaching the student. 2e learners have insatiable curiosity, fascinating minds, and amazing potential. While they may present challenges (e.g., fidgeting or speaking out impulsively before being called on), they are also a joy to teach. Let them see that you appreciate and enjoy them and avoid showing irritability or aggravation,



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even when the student acts up. If a difficult student exhausts you, consult other teachers, counselors, parents, and even the child on ways to mitigate (or at least diminish) the source of friction. Don't give up too quickly. These students will benefit from a good student/teacher relationship even more than will their easier-to-get-along-with peers.

Strive to establish mutual respect by involving the student in decision-making and acknowledging the value of the student's contributions. When you treat students with respect, they tend to appreciate and like you, triggering a drive to learn and to behave appropriately, with the hope of making you proud. Expect compliance with classroom rules, but also listen to and respect the student's needs (e.g., to move around or fidget, or to have quiet space to retreat to) and opinions (e.g., about what he or she wants to learn). Teachers who establish mutual respect do the following:

- Work collaboratively with students
- Discuss alternative strategies to deal with social conflict and classroom issues
- Arrive at viable solutions determined by mutual agreement.

Have high expectations. The expectations teachers have for students tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. Believe in the ability and potential of your 2e student, and show that you expect the student to achieve and be successful. Students often will work hard and behave appropriately to prove that your confidence in them is warranted.



Offer help in achieving academic and social objectives. Strive to understand what the student needs to succeed in school. Monitor the student with an eye toward specific difficulties he or she may be having. Reach out, offer help, and establish with the student the ways this help will be delivered. Be careful not to focus exclusively on the weakness side of the 2e profile. Reinforcing and encouraging the student's strengths and interests are of primary importance.

What 2e Students Can Do

Students can take actions that include the following:

While more mature students can **work deliberately to develop personal and advocacy skills** conducive to developing good relationships with their teachers, even young children can learn some helpful strategies.

Make efforts to build a personal relationship with the teacher. At the beginning of the year, ask if you can meet one-on-one so that you can get to know each other. Talk about your needs. Stay after class to chat for a few minutes. Go to office hours. Share your interests and successes outside of school with your teacher. The better your teacher knows you and understands the person you are and the person you want to be, the more likely and better able he or she will be to help you toward your goals.

Show appreciation by thanking your teacher for a lesson you enjoyed, for feedback on a paper you wrote, or for the way the teacher made a topic come alive for you. Positive feedback makes people feel warmly toward the person giving it.

Show respect and be polite. Try to listen and not talk to peers when the teacher is talking. Say *please* and *thank you*. If you feel that instruction is

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pointless or boring, explain this privately to the teacher rather than as an aside to your classmates.

Ask for and accept help. Let your teacher know when you don't understand something as well as when you already know the material and need something different or more advanced.

Be patient and persistent. Recognize that your teacher has many students in the class and that he or she may not always be able to respond to your needs immediately. Try to be patient, but also (politely) persistent in asking for the additional help, clarification, or accommodations you may need.

What Parents Can Do

Options for parents include the following:

Teach your child to be his or her own best advocate. For obvious reasons (power differential, age difference) parents tend to take on the role of advocate for their child in school. However, to the extent that the student can advocate for him or herself, it can be particularly effective. Teachers tend to be more open to requests and concerns expressed by students (and can be somewhat wary or skeptical of what they may perceive as “helicopter” parenting).

Teach your child social skills helpful in developing sound relationships with all people, including teachers (e.g., listening, turn-taking, conversational give-and-take, respect, complimenting others).

Ask for a meeting at the beginning of the school year or, even better, before the first day of school, to provide a “heads up” about your child. Explain your son's or

daughter's strengths and weaknesses, susceptibilities, and personality. Ask for help addressing both exceptionalities — your child's giftedness and areas of weakness.

Check in after a week or two and on a regular (but not excessive) basis to see how things are going and ask what you can do on your end to be helpful. Perhaps you can reinforce desired behaviors at home (e.g., waiting before blurting out an answer). Regular bedtimes and being consistently on time to school help as well. Listen to what the teacher is saying about your child and consider the feedback objectively.

Be a squeaky wheel, but a polite one. The squeaky wheel often does “get the grease.” Don't hesitate to be direct about asking teachers to meet your child's needs. Stay on top of what's going on in the classroom but try to be polite and collaborative. Teachers may make more of an effort for a family they like.

If things go wrong — your child comes home in tears or a teacher sends home behavioral warnings on a daily basis — it's time to take emergency action. Ask for a meeting with the teacher first. Go with an open mind, listen, and take notes. Patiently explain what you think may be happening from your child's perspective, trying not to be too defensive. Suggest strategies that may be more effective. If things don't improve, enlist the help of the principal, school psychologist, or an outside consultant to help or to work with the teacher.

Conclusion

By implementing these recommendations, there will be a greater likelihood that your child will enjoy the many benefits of a positive student/teacher relationship. Among these benefits are greater self-confidence, greater motivation, increased interest in class, positive social outcomes, emotional well-being, and even higher grades. Looking back on their school years, children may remember with great fondness that special teacher who really believed in them.

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