



INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS BEHAVIORAL NEEDS FOR STUDENTS WITH IEPs

The Importance of Strong and Healthy Relationships

As adults examine and address their own biases and beliefs about student behavior, race, ability, socioeconomic status, and other factors, they should also reflect on the degree to which they establish meaningful and authentic relationships with students. The importance of relationships in an educational context is highlighted by a comment made by Dr. James Comer, professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale University, who stated that "no significant learning occurs without a significant relationship."

Strong and healthy relationships with an adult can be critical to how well students learn and can have long-term positive effects for students' academic achievement, engagement in learning, and social development.

- A review of educational research analysis of 46 studies found that strong teacher-student relationships were associated in both the short-term and long-term with improvements on practically every measure schools care about: higher student academic engagement, attendance, grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates. Those effects were strong even after controlling for differences in students' individual, family, and school backgrounds (Sparks 2019).
- Teachers benefit from strong and healthy relationships, too. A study in the *European Journal of Psychology of Education* found that a teacher's relationship with students was the best predictor of how much the teacher experienced joy versus anxiety in class (Sparks 2019).
- The 2019 Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that students who report having strong adult support, as well as high levels of school and extracurricular participation and belonging, are less likely to engage in risk behaviors (e.g., physical fights, carrying a weapon, alcohol and drug use, risky sexual behavior) and more likely to report positive mental health and higher grades.

All students benefit from supportive and healthy relationships with the adults at school. It is important for adults to cultivate and build positive relationships for students that have not been equitably served through explicit or implicit (racial, gender, ability, socioeconomic) bias. For students whose behavior interferes with learning, it is equally important. If a student has experienced exclusion due to disciplinary measures or other forms of punitive discipline in response to their behavior, their relationships at school may be damaged, setting them on a path for future removals, disengagement, and marginalization. Studies show that when teachers think empathically instead of punitively about the behavior that interferes with learning, “they cultivate better relationships and help reduce discipline problems” (Parker 2016).

Building Relationships

It is the responsibility of each adult, especially of the professional educator, to build strong and healthy relationships with each and every student. For some students, it may take more time and energy from the adult to establish an authentic and positive relationship. Adults must intentionally cultivate these relationships through their everyday actions and words to build authentic relationships with students, especially students who have been subjected to bias, bigotry or marginalization. Studies suggest that strengthening individual teacher-student relationships has beneficial and cumulative effects for other aspects of classroom life. When teachers authentically show care and respect toward their students, the students' attitudes about school and behavior improve. Research on high school students who have frequent and intense discipline problems shows that when adolescents perceive their teachers are trustworthy people, they show less defiant behavior (Gregory and Ripski 2008).

There are many ways for adults to build authentic relationships with students. The DPI Student Services/Prevention and Wellness Team provides several resources for understanding what is needed to develop strong relationships. A link to an online module on "[Building Relationships](#)" and "[Building Relationships Despite Challenges](#)" can be found as part of the [DPI's School Mental Health Resources](#). Both modules are part of a series of modules from the [Trauma Sensitive Schools Online Professional Development System](#). While the series of modules should be taken as a whole, these modules on building relationships provide information on the importance of safe and supportive relationships.

The "Building Relationships" module addresses the concept of building relationships by using the six principles of Compassionate Instruction, which are based on the handbook [The Heart of Learning: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success](#). This handbook was written and compiled by the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and Western Washington University staff. It provides specific strategies to improve students' education and learning outcomes by creating safe and supportive learning environments. While this resource addresses support for students impacted by trauma, the strategies equally apply to students whose behavior interferes with learning.

Building Relationships by Using the Six Principles of Compassionate Instruction

1. Always empower, never disempower
 - Always avoid power struggles
 - Discipline must never resemble the trauma
 - Discipline should be consistent, respectful, and non-violent
2. Provide unconditional positive regard
 - Genuine respect
 - Sustained kindness
 - Empathy
3. Maintain high academic and behavioral expectations
 - Consistent expectations and limits
 - Set limits and rules that keep students safe and protect their well-being using a calm and respectful voice
4. Check assumptions, observe, and question
 - Identify your own assumptions
 - Catch yourself making an assumption and make an observation instead
 - Ask questions and really listen to the response
5. Be a relationship coach
 - By helping students feel safe and supported, they can put more energy into learning
 - By being a relationship coach, teachers can help students mend perceptions of community and friends
6. Provide guided opportunities for helpful participation
 - Carefully plan, model, and observe ongoing interactions

Engage in Active Listening

Adults need to foster empathy for and with their students in order to better address the behavior that interferes with learning. One way to build empathy is for adults to use active listening so they can truly hear the perspective of the student. Active listening requires the listener to be engaged and attentive. It is the process of fully concentrating on what is being said, reflecting back, and withholding

judgement or advice. It is the act of trying to fully understand the message of the speaker. Authentic listening helps an adult take in a student's many stories and experiences and disrupts biased thinking.

Elena Aquilar reminds us that active listening is about empathy. She provides listening tips and tools in her book, [The Art of Coaching: Effective Strategies for School Transformation](#). One tool, available on the [Bright Morning](#) website, is the [Active and Intentional Listening](#) document, which provides ways to reflect back what we hear.

Another example can be found in the article [Expansive Listening: An Essential Coaching Support](#), written by Joseph Kanke, WI Statewide Coaching Coordinator. His article provides readers with different ways of listening and suggestions on how to do so. The Wisconsin DPI's Disproportionality Technical Assistance Network (DTAN) added a visual representation to accompany the descriptions of expansive listening, which can be found here: [Expansive Listening and Reflection](#).

Developmental Relationships Framework

The Search Institute provides another helpful resource: the [Developmental Relationships Framework](#). Building developmental relationships needs to be intentional, and this framework has identified five elements, with 20 specific actions, to make relationships powerful in a young person's life (Search Institute 2018). The five elements are:

1. Express Care - show the student that they matter.
2. Challenge Growth - expect more and push the student to reach their potential.
3. Provide Support - empower and advocate for the student.
4. Share Power - respect and collaborate with the student.
5. Expand Possibilities - connect the student in ways that broadens their world.

To see the full list of specific actions, go to the Search Institute and click on [The Developmental Relationships Framework](#). Additional information can also be found at [Ideas for Building Developmental Relationships](#).

In summary, strong and healthy adult-student relationships are very important for long-term student success. These relationships are necessary to draw students into the process of learning and promote their desire to learn. It is the adult's responsibility, not the student's, to put forth the effort to build strong and healthy relationships, which are critical to the student's academic and social development.

Reflection and Application Activities

The following reflection and application activities were developed to build the knowledge, skills, and systems of adults so they can assist students with accessing, engaging, and making progress in age or grade level curriculum, instruction, environments, and activities.

1. Reflect on your relationship with the student.
 - How do you know whether you have a healthy relationship with a student or not? What are your indicators of a healthy relationship?
 - How are you considering the perspective of the student? What are the student's indicators of a healthy relationship?
 - How might you create a process to understand your students' views of a healthy relationship?
2. Review the Building Relationships by Using the Six Principles of Compassionate Instruction section of this section.
 - Which aspects of the Six Principles do you think your student(s) need the most?
 - Which aspects of the Six Principles do you think you need the most from others that support and build relationships with you?
 - Which aspects of the Six Principles can you help other adults cultivate?
 - Which aspects of the Six Principles do you want to focus on cultivating with your students?
3. Review [The Developmental Relationships Framework](#) and [Ideas for Building Developmental Relationships](#) from the Search Institute.
 - What ideas from these resources will you be able to bring into your regular classroom routines and structures and how will you incorporate them?
 - Which ideas from these resources are you already using that you can help other adults incorporate into their classroom routines and structures?
4. Using the [Expansive Listening](#) tool provided by DTAN, practice active listening with your colleagues through one of the ways listed. To practice active listening, get in partner pairs and allow for one partner to talk about any topic for 2 to 3 minutes uninterrupted while the other partner only listens (i.e. the listening partner does not comment, ask questions, or provide any additional information and only practices listening). The pairs

- then switch roles, so the former speaker will now be the listener. It may help to have a few “discussion prompts” for the person whose turn is it to talk.
- What did you notice when you only listened to another person for 2 to 3 minutes?
 - How did it feel being listened to for 2 to 3 minutes uninterrupted?
 - How often are you able to only listen for 2 to 3 minutes to a student who is sharing information without providing any additional information?
5. Watch the [Angel List video](#) from the Wisconsin DPI Promoting Excellence for All Student-Teacher Relationships focus area.
- How can your school or district develop a process for identifying students who report having or not having strong and healthy relationships with adults in the school learning environment?
 - What training and support do school staff need to help them learn strategies for building strong and healthy relationships with students?
6. Watch the [Classroom Culture video](#) from the DPI Promoting Excellence for All Student-Teacher Relationships focus area.
- What are the various ways teachers in your school or district build strong and healthy relationships through development of a classroom culture?
 - How do you know if the strategies teachers are using to build a classroom culture recognize each student’s unique background and life experiences, not just the background and culture of the adults in the classroom?
 - In what ways can new and veteran teachers be supported in developing a classroom culture that reflects the values and backgrounds of each and every student and family in the school community?
7. Watch the [Cultural Competency video](#) from the DPI Promoting Excellence for All Student-Teacher Relationships focus area and read [Wisconsin’s Model to Inform Culturally Responsive Practices](#).
- How are teachers improving their knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures and lived experiences?
 - What strategies are being used across the school or district to support teachers in building their cultural competencies?

8. Watch the [Mentor Students video](#) from the DPI Promoting Excellence for All Student-Teacher Relationships focus area.
 - What systems are in place or could be in place to ensure each and every student has an adult mentor that they can access regularly during the week?
 - How can partnerships with parents, community members, and community organizations provide mentoring for students who may not feel connected with school staff?
 - How does your school or district identify which students need additional mentoring and support from adults? How do you know if your mentoring program is providing students with the type of relationships they need?
9. Using the [Inclusive Learning Communities \(ILC\) Practice Profile](#) from the DPI [RPIC Project](#), review the essential attributes of a learning environment that is inclusive of each and every learner. Consider the core competency area of Authentic Learner Engagement.
 - How are adults establishing positive educator-learner relationships?
 - Reflect if the use in practice is Expected, Developmental, or Unacceptable.
 - What are the areas of strength and needs for adults in the building?
10. Watch the [Building Relationships module](#) from the DPI [Trauma Sensitive Schools Online Professional Development System](#) and review the module handout “[Building Relationships Implementation Tool Determining Boundaries in Staff-Student Relationships.](#)”
 - What changes can you as an individual and collectively as a staff can be made to strengthen relationships between adults and students?
 - What boundaries do you and your colleagues agree should be understood when developing strong and healthy relationships with students?
11. Watch the [Building Relationships Despite Challenges module](#) from the DPI [Trauma Sensitive Schools Online Professional Development System](#) and review the module handout “[Building Relationships Despite Challenges Tool.](#)”
 - Which students in your school do you feel staff have built strong and healthy relationships and which do you feel they have not?
 - What changes can you as an individual and collectively as a staff make to strengthen relationships between adults and students?

Resources and Articles

[Improving Students' Relationships with Teachers to Provide Essential Supports for Learning](#)

American Psychological Association provides an article on the importance of relationships.

[Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction: The Heart of Learning: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success](#)

The Heart of Learning: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success is a handbook for teachers written and compiled by OSPI and Western Washington University staff.

[Developmental Relationships Framework](#)

The Search Institute created the Developmental Relationships Framework, drawing on research and the experiences shared directly by young people and adults across the United States.

[Wisconsin DPI Promoting Excellence for All](#) provides information and strategies successfully used by Wisconsin educators to raise achievement of students of color, closing the gap between them and their peers. It includes strategies for building positive relationships between students and teachers. [Wisconsin DPI Promoting Excellence for All: Student-Teacher Relationships](#)

[Wisconsin DPI School Mental Health Resources](#) provides the [Trauma Sensitive Schools Online Professional Development System](#). It includes modules on [Building Relationships](#) and [Building Relationships Despite Challenges](#).

[Summary Report: 2019 Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#)

The Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is conducted as part of a national effort by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to monitor health-risk behaviors of the nation's high school students.

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