

Chapter 3

BUILDING POSITIVE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Mr. Harlan, my sixth-grade science teacher, knew when to joke around and when to be serious. He also was extremely good at making the material fun. When learning about physics, we shot water balloons out of slingshots. In addition, he formed personal relationships with us by making an effort to get to know each student. He would often go around the class asking how our weekend was or how our other classes were going. He made an effort to come to sporting events and school plays in order to understand and support us. At lunchtime he had an open-door policy, and his office was usually filled with students chatting with him over lunch. Mr. Harlan had high expectations of us, and we all tried extremely hard in his class because we didn't want to disappoint him. Everyone was well-behaved because we felt we would be letting him down if we acted out. Because of the strong teacher-student relationship, we learned a lot in Mr. Harlan's class, and there were very few behavior problems.

Of all the recent changes in our talk about behavior and classroom management, perhaps the most dramatic change of all has been in how current discussions focus on building positive teacher-student relationships. This focus is nothing new. As we saw in Chapter 2, which discussed the kindergarten movement toward the end of the 19th century, building positive teacher-student relationships has always been on the minds of educators. However, today's discussions of building positive

CHAPTER OVERVIEW**Influence of Age on Building Teacher-Student Relationships**

Relationships With Young Children

Relationships With Older Students

Influence of Context on Building Teacher-Student Relationships**Overarching Needs for Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**

Showing Care

Exercising Authority and Communicating High Expectations

teacher-student relationships are grounded in theory and in research. So, the discourse today tends to focus on theory, research, and what can be measured.

The current focus on building positive teacher-student relationships has come about, in part, as a result of educators becoming dissatisfied with the results of the obedience-oriented approaches that became fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s, the most famous example being the Canters' (Canter & Canter, 1976) assertive discipline approach, although in a more recent work, Lee Canter (1996) has made it clear that the success of assertive discipline depends on first establishing rapport with students.

One of the most frequent criticisms of obedience-oriented approaches has been that while they foster obedience, they do not foster the self-regulation we ultimately want from responsible students (Weinstein, 1999). A less frequent criticism has been that obedience-oriented approaches may become addictive. That is, if they are used early and often, teachers may come to depend on obedience-oriented approaches to keep order. In Ronald Butchart's (1998a) words,

While more research is needed, it appears that elementary schools have increasingly adopted behaviorist modes of control, with the result that secondary schools have been forced by students to move more and more toward *defensive teaching*. . . Behaviorist modes of control lose their effectiveness through overuse . . . leaving secondary teachers little recourse but to teach defensively. (p. 9)¹

Perhaps the most convincing argument against obedience-oriented approaches is that they create a negative climate not conducive to motivating students to learn and contribute. Obedience-oriented approaches make teachers into what William Glasser (1986) called *boss managers*. Here is an example of

one teacher **teaching defensively** and being a **boss manager**, from Sue Cowley's (2001) book on methods for managing behavior problems:

The teacher noticed that a few students in his ninth-grade class were chewing gum, which was not allowed. On one occasion, he noticed that one boy was chewing gum, so he went to the front of the classroom, picked up a wastepaper basket and held it under the boy's mouth, directing the boy to put the gum in the basket. The boy said he swallowed the gum, so the teacher warned him of what would happen if he were caught again.

Not long afterward, the same situation arose. Instead of reacting as before, the teacher got the boy to come to him, and then leaned toward him and whispered while pointing to the basket: "Put the gum in there NOW, and don't give me 'I'm not chewing,' because I saw you. Stay behind for five minutes after the lesson to clean up my room. Any more rubbish from you, you'll be in a half-hour detention." (p. 151)

Cowley (2001) commends the teacher in this example for exerting control and authority when control and authority were being openly challenged. Nevertheless, though the teacher did, indeed, need to exert control and authority, the exchange between the student and the teacher is not the kind of exchange that does much to build a positive teacher-student relationship. And while every instance of exerting control and authority need not also build positive relationships, one would hope that there would be plenty of occasions that do both. Furthermore, it is not too far-fetched to assume that if most of a teacher's interactions with students are of the type illustrated in this example, the result will be a classroom that fails to motivate students to learn and cooperate.

This last point is the central point of approaches defined by their emphasis on establishing positive teacher-student relationships. These approaches have in common the assumption that everything starts with the teacher-student relationship. If that relationship is good, then there are possibilities for learning and cooperation. If it is not good, then subsequent methods, however thoughtful, are apt to fail. A good deal of recent research backs up this assumption (for a review, see Pianta, 2006), and even Lee Canter (1996) has agreed that teachers should first work to establish rapport with students before implementing assertive discipline.

One of the clearest explanations of why it makes good sense to think of the teacher-student relationship as the starting point and linchpin for successful behavior and classroom management was provided decades ago by Larry Brendtro (1969) in his essay "Establishing Relationship Beachheads," an essay originally intended for those working with **relationship-resistant** older children and adolescents in residential treatment centers. Brendtro distinguished between

PREVIEW

Assertive discipline will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5 and later in Chapter 8.

three kinds of learning processes: learning through social reinforcers (e.g., **praise/encouragement**), learning through insight, and learning through imitating or identifying with another. His essay explains that for those processes to be activated, the teacher must become, in the eyes of students, a source of social reinforcers, a source of insight, and a desirable model to imitate, and these three together define what we should mean by a good teacher-student relationship.

Brendtro (1969) went on to show how those working with even relationship-resistant students can make building positive relationships between teachers and students into a full-fledged approach to behavior and classroom management by developing good communication with students, by overcoming barriers that students may put between themselves and teachers, and by making teachers more attractive models for students to imitate. The key, for him, was communication.

Brendtro's (1969) most practical suggestions included showing how occasional "small talk" with students can open lines of communication needed to develop a positive relationship and showing how educators can use humor and nonthreatening reactions to defuse charged situations when students challenge authority. However, Brendtro gave no specific methods for educators to employ, implying that much depends on educators being sensitive, exercising good judgment, and having good communication skills.

Today's educators and researchers want more specifics, or so it seems. Today, the assumption seems to be that we can, at least in principle, measure what it takes to build positive teacher-student relationships. In addition, today's educators put far more stress than did Brendtro on how the meaning of building positive teacher-student relationships changes with changes in age and context (Pianta, 2006).

INFLUENCE OF AGE ON BUILDING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

There are many ways to group by age. For our purposes, we need only distinguish between young children (roughly 3 to 6 years old) and older students (roughly 7 to 17). This distinction highlights how teachers often are called upon to meet the security needs of younger children and the autonomy needs of older students.

Relationships With Young Children

Building a positive teacher-student relationship with young children can mean making a child feel secure by feeling attached to a teacher. That is, young children often require that teacher-student relationships share features associated with secure attachments between parents and children, as is evident by their

occasionally using teachers as “secure bases” to check in with (“Look, I’ve drawn a house!”) and by their using teachers as sources of comfort when hurt, guides when confused, and allies when attacked (Scarlett, 1998).

When young children do not develop secure attachment relationships, they often misbehave (Greenberg & Speltz, 1988). Take the following as an example:

Seth, age four, entered his Head Start class at midyear. His father was in prison, and his mother worked long hours. When not in school, Seth stayed with a babysitter who, unfortunately, directed all of her affection toward her own son.

In the classroom, Seth played by himself, and when other children approached him, he often said, “Go away.” At times he disrupted others’ play, as when he would purposely kick over a classmate’s block construction. With teachers, he ignored their directives and acted as if he were totally independent.

Seth’s problem was he did not have a secure attachment, either at home or at school. So, one teacher was assigned to foster an attachment relationship with him—by repeatedly marking when he was playing (“Seth, I see you drawing”) and by encouraging Seth to “check in” (“When you finish drawing, come get me. I want to see what you have drawn.”), by going out of her way to provide him help when help was needed, by her occasionally co-playing with him, and by her doing all the little and not so little things that a sensitive parent might do for a young child.

Without additional discipline or behavior management, Seth’s behavior improved dramatically, and he became not only a cooperative child but also a positive leader in the class. (Scarlett, 1998, p. 37)

Does this mean that teachers of the very young should always act like parents to students? Not at all. As Lilian Katz explained (1989), there are and should be distinct differences between teaching and mothering. For example, it is fine for mothers to be focused on their individual child, but teachers must focus on the group as well as individuals. And it is fine for mothers to be intent always on optimizing their attachment with their child, but teachers must strike a balance between optimum attachment and optimum detachment. In Table 3.1, these and additional distinctions between mothering and teaching are defined.

Nevertheless, though teachers need not think of themselves as mothers or fathers, young children can treat them as mothers or fathers, and this is generally a good thing. Women teaching kindergarten and first grade often report instances when children inadvertently call them “mom,” another indication that at young ages, children attach to their teachers. In Katz’s (1989) words, “It may be possible for young children to feel very attached to their teachers . . . without teachers responding at the same level of intensity” (p. 54). And in special cases,

TABLE 3.1 Dimensions Distinguishing Mothering From Teaching

Role Dimension	Mothering	Teaching
Scope of functions	Diffuse and limitless	Specific and limited
Intensity of affect	High	Low
Attachment	Optimum attachment	Optimum detachment
Rationality	Optimum irrationality	Optimum rationality
Spontaneity	Optimum spontaneity	Optimum intentionality
Partiality	Partial	Impartial
Scope of responsibility	Individual	Whole group

Source: Katz (1989).

such as the case of Seth, actively fostering an attachment can be a preferred method. In any case, young children behaving in ways that indicate they feel attached to their teacher is, we can assume, generally a sign of there being a positive teacher-student relationship.

Take, for example, the well-known practice of young children **checking in** and announcing to their parents what they are doing at any given moment—something akin to an infant getting physically close to a parent after a period of exploring—or what the attachment theorists call “using the mother as a secure base from which to explore” (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Here is an example of a 4-year-old “checking in” and, in analogous fashion, using her teacher as a “secure base”:

Heather and Marianne, two delightful four-year-olds, busied themselves making “cookies” from Play-Doh. While pounding and shaping, they fantasized together about the party they were to give—who to ask, what to wear, and so forth. Suddenly, without warning, Heather turned in her seat and yelled to her teacher, “We’re making cookies!” The teacher nodded and in an approving voice responded, “Oh, you’re making cookies.” Heather seemed pleased by the response and turned to resume play with Marianne. (Scarlett, 1998, p. 32)

The relevance of such observations becomes clear when it is realized that many preschoolers with behavior problems often do not “check in” and do not

use teachers as a secure base, as was evident in the example of Seth. Here is a related observation made by one longtime consultant to early childhood centers:

My experience has been that many disruptive, uncooperative children do not check in enough, do not share with teachers what they are doing and accomplishing. It simply does not occur to them that teachers might be interested. To counteract this mistaken belief and to cultivate checking in, we can do more than simply reinforce infrequent moments of checking in. We can ask a child to check in and come get us when some project is finished. We can make clear that we are interested. (Scarlett, 1998, p. 35)

However, the **attachment to teachers**, or attachment-like relationship between the teacher and the young child, is not what is called for later on. Later on, students, especially adolescents, may be defensive about cultivating a relationship with a teacher that has feelings associated with attachment. That does not, however, preclude teachers from forming positive relationships with older children and adolescents. It means, simply, that the meaning of positive teacher-student relationships changes with age.

Relationships With Older Students

Later on, the meaning of positive teacher-student relationships is captured more by a teacher's showing care for students in the way teachers challenge and guide students to learn and develop. Here is an example taken from the popular movie *Stand and Deliver* (Menendez, 1988) of a teacher, himself Hispanic, teaching a math class of mostly Hispanic high school students. Though it is an example from a movie and not real life, it nevertheless captures what goes on in classrooms of older students where teachers build good relationships with older students by teaching in positive ways:

- T: (While playfully speaking in a stereotypical Mexican accent) This is basic math, but basic math is too easy for you burros—so I'm going to teach you algebra, 'cause I'm the champ, and if the only thing you know how to do is add and subtract, you'll only be prepared to do one thing—pump gas.
- S: Hey, ripping off a gas station is better than working in one.
- T: (While playfully sounding like a gang leader) Hey, Mozela, I'm a tough guy. Tough guys don't do math. Tough guys do deep-fried chicken for a living. You want a wing or a leg, man?
- T: (A little while later) Minus two plus two equals?

S: Zero.

T: Zero, you're right, simple. That's it—minus two plus two equals zero. . . . Did you know that neither the Greeks nor the Romans were capable of using the concept of zero? It was your ancestors, the Mayans, who first contemplated the zero, the absence of value—true story. You burros have math in your blood.

In this example, the teacher's mocking style and humor wonderfully match that of his adolescent students; however, both his serious purpose and competence make clear that in adopting the students' style and humor, he remains the teacher who can make them better. All this is what adolescent students need and say they need for there to be a positive teacher-student relationship (Hoy & Weinstein, 2006).

Review

Age has an important influence on teacher-student relationships:

- (1) For young children, relationships are similar to secure attachments between parents and children.
- (2) For older students, relationships depend on teachers caring for, challenging, and guiding students so that they learn and develop and, often, on teachers having a sense of humor.

INFLUENCE OF CONTEXT ON BUILDING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS



For material related to this concept, go to Video Clip 3.1 on the Student Resource CD bound into the back of your textbook.

The last example, from *Stand and Deliver*, also says something about how what constitutes a positive teacher-student relationship often differs from one school or cultural context to another. In some schools, it can mean being somewhat relaxed and informal. In other schools, it can mean just the opposite. Each school is apt, then, to have a preferred style, which inevitably influences how both teachers and students come to define their relationships with one another.

The above example also illustrates how culture figures into how teacher-student relationships are defined. The culture of the adolescents in the previous example demanded a tough but caring, no-nonsense approach, not the approach adopted by many middle-class teachers in suburban schools. In the following example, we see something similar.

Cynthia Ballenger (1998), a sociolinguist (someone who explains group behavior by explaining how groups use language), spent years teaching in a predominantly Haitian school. She found that when she adopted a progressive, constructivist approach to teaching that used conflicts between children to promote negotiation and verbal self-expression, her Haitian-American students reacted as if she were giving them license to misbehave, and so they misbehaved.

While observing Haitian teachers' classrooms, Ballenger (1998) noticed that these classrooms were orderly, and the children were well-behaved. It was at that moment that Ballenger realized that the overriding problem was not with the children but with the mismatch between her approach to discipline and what the children were used to.

In discussions with Haitian teachers and with Haitian parents, Ballenger (1998) learned that Haitians are concerned that American teachers are not controlling Haitian children adequately. This was especially evident when one Haitian teacher arrived at her school and watched a teacher telling a Haitian-American child that she needed to go to her classroom. The child refused and kicked the teacher. The Haitian teacher had had enough. She asked the school's director to bring her all the Haitian-American children right away. The director and she gathered all the children into one large common room. The following is the text of what she said to the children:

Teacher: Does your mother let you bite?

Children: No.

Teacher: Does your father let you punch kids?

Children: No.

Teacher: Do you kick at home?

Children: No.

Teacher: You don't respect anyone, not the teachers who play with you or the adults that work upstairs. You need to respect adults, even people you see on the streets. You are taking good ways you learn at home and not bringing them to school. You are taking the bad ways you are learning at school and taking them home. You are not going to do this anymore. Do you want your parents to be ashamed of you? (p. 148)



Cynthia Ballenger

Source: Cynthia Ballenger.

The content and form of these conversations are crucially different from what most North American teachers usually do in the same situation, and they are different from North American ways of exercising authority. Most North American teachers are concerned with the articulation of individual feelings and with being fair. In contrast, Haitian teachers are more concerned with articulating a child's connections to those who care for the child, especially parents, teachers, and God. Furthermore, Haitian teachers are less concerned with how a child is feeling and more concerned with a child's ability to follow directions and respect elders.

In Haitian reactions to misbehavior, immediate consequences are not made explicit. Haitian teachers do not explain why they are against hitting and biting. Rather, they refer to such behavior as “bad” and then explain the long-term consequences for bad behavior in general; for example, bringing shame to the family. Children are told to be good for the sake of being good. There are no larger explanations or negotiations. In contrast, American teachers often appear to be giving children new information in misbehavior situations. Furthermore, North American teachers explain misbehavior as if misbehavior is a result of feelings that the child has failed to identify and control.

Haitian teachers believe that children are able to share adults' understanding of what constitutes bad behavior. In this belief, they have high expectations for children and because of this belief, they use rhetorical questions, such as, “Does your mother let you bite kids? Does your father let you talk back?” Haitian children understand their role without difficulty; they repeat the expected answers in unison. There is no choice of response. There is no discussion about feelings.

Through our North American cultural lens, it may be difficult to see the love and warmth in the Haitian authoritarian approach to showing care, exercising authority, and building positive teacher-student relationships. However, that love and warmth is apparent in the smiles and behavior of the Haitian-American children thriving in their own communities. Different approaches to building positive teacher-student relationships may change the meaning of positive teacher-student relationships, but they do not change the need for showing care and exercising authority while communicating high expectations.

OVERARCHING NEEDS FOR POSITIVE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Therefore, regardless of age and context, the two overarching needs that have to be met if there are to be positive teacher-student relationships are **showing care** and **exercising authority** while **communicating high expectations**. Again, these

aren't just the needs mentioned by educators. They are the needs mentioned by students as well (Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). We will look more closely at what it means to show care and exercise authority while communicating high expectations so as to build positive teacher-student relationships.

Showing Care

Increasingly, showing care has become a major theme running throughout today's discussions of teacher-student relationships (Charney, 2002; Noddings, 2002; Watson & Battistich, 2006), which means that even as the emphasis has been on being research minded, there is at least a tacit recognition that good behavior and classroom management rests ultimately on something that is difficult to measure; namely, showing care.

Showing care is difficult to measure for two main reasons. First, showing care refers not to a set of methods or behaviors but to an attitude and style of the teacher and an experience of the student. Second, showing care comes in many forms, and some of these forms may, at first, appear to be the opposite of showing care, as in the previous example of Haitian teachers showing care by being tough and demanding.

Throughout this chapter, and in subsequent chapters as well, we show how care is at the core of developing positive teacher-student relationships that matter deeply, not simply for the short term, but for the long term as well. To illustrate what we mean, here is one man's account of a caring incident that happened over 40 years ago, when he was in eighth grade:

It had been a rough grading period, especially in math, and a rough time at home. Then at recess one day, a teacher came up to me and said, "Bill, I hear you're having a hard time in math. I'm really sorry"—and then he walked away. I remember his saying this to me like it was yesterday because, I suppose, it meant a lot to me then, as it means a lot to me now.

Showing care, then, can have a powerful, positive, and lasting effect, as this example clearly shows.

Communicating Positively

Showing care can also be expressed by communicating positively. Communicating positively can mean something simple, such as making sure that when communicating with students, positive statements outnumber negative statements.

Source: Gordon Training Institute.



Thomas Gordon

The research shows that this matters (Becker, Engelmann, & Thomas, 1975). However, communicating positively has different meanings and different effects, including the effects of feeling known, understood, accepted, and supported.

Gordon and Teacher Effectiveness Training. Feeling known and understood comes about when teachers, from the very first time children and adolescents walk into their classrooms, address students by their names; when high school teachers take time to meet with students individually; when teachers of all grades show interest in students' passions and interests—the list is long. For many, the single most important way that students feel known and understood may be when teachers listen. Nowhere do we find this message about listening more clearly explained and emphasized than in

the writings of Thomas Gordon (2003), author of the book *Teacher Effectiveness Training*, which was widely read during the 1970s and 1980s and is still referred to often today.

Gordon (2003) came from the counseling tradition associated with the “client-centered” approach of Carl Rogers (1951). The central idea in this approach is that all of us, children and adolescents included, have within ourselves the strength and wherewithal to change, grow, and develop, but we may be momentarily blocked from developing by having **conditions of worth** placed upon us by others. Conditions of worth are imposed when the message from others is that so long as we measure up to others' standards, we are worthy or fine. So, both negative judgments, such as “You are being inconsiderate,” as well as praise, such as “Wonderful that you are being considerate,” are messages about conditions of worth.

Given this analysis of the root cause of persistent problem behavior, the logical prescription is to communicate to children and adolescents a kind of acceptance that is almost a synonym for care. This approach does not deny the existence of problem behavior; rather, it calls for a radical reaching beyond problem behavior to continuously show respect for and trust in the person.

Gordon (2003) provided teachers with two big ideas for dealing with problem behavior by showing respect, trust, and unconditional *positive regard* (Rogers's [1951] term for acceptance). The first idea is **taking ownership of problems**. Teachers take ownership of problems when they communicate with “**I**” messages that stick to the facts and avoid negative evaluations of students. For example, if two students are whispering in the back of the room while a teacher is explaining the next assignment, following Gordon, the teacher might say, “Jimmy and Billy, when you whisper while I am explaining an assignment, I worry because I know you will miss what I am saying, and then I'll have to repeat myself.”

These “I” messages have three effects: first, they locate the problem in the teacher. That is, they communicate that the teacher “owns” the problem (of feeling worried). The effect is to make the communication more personal. Second, they avoid casting students in the role of bad guys. Third, they leave the solution up to students.

This third point may not be clear enough by itself, so Gordon (2003) explains that whenever a teacher gives a “You” message (e.g., If the teacher in the previous hypothetical example were to say, “Stop whispering and pay attention”), the implicit message is that the students can’t or won’t find a solution on their own; they must be given the solution by someone else and made to behave. In contrast, “I” messages communicate that the teacher assumes the students, once they understand the problem that whispering causes, will find and carry out a solution on their own.

Gordon’s (2003) second big idea is **active listening**. When listening actively, educators (and here we include school psychologists, reading specialists, and all those involved in helping children and adolescents in school settings) not only listen carefully with empathy and acceptance to what students are saying, they provide proof that they have understood by feeding back what students have said to them to make sure they have understood correctly. Active listening is especially important when students are upset and feel misunderstood.

The paradox Gordon (2003) points to is the fact that rather than reinforcing misbehavior or leaving students stuck in their problem, active listening often frees students to problem solve. But even if no perfect solution emerges from active listening, the experience of feeling listened to and understood can be a powerful and positive experience for students, making future cooperation more likely.

When first hearing what Gordon (2003) is suggesting, many teachers do not believe these methods of giving “I” messages and active listening can possibly succeed, so they are surprised when their initial experiments with “I” messages and active listening often help considerably. Indeed, Gordon’s advice has helped many teachers regain control of their classrooms, and in positive ways, a conclusion that comes not just from anecdotes and informal observation but also from research (Carducci, 1976; Peterson, Loveless, Knapp, Basta, & Anderson, 1979).

Review

Gordon provided teachers with two big ideas for dealing with problem behavior while showing respect, trust, and unconditional positive regard:

- (1) Taking ownership of problems through “I” messages
- (2) Active listening

Furthermore, and consistent with the suggestion that we remove conditions of worth from classroom teaching, several studies have shown the benefits of replacing nonspecific praise with encouragement (Hitz & Driscoll, 1988). This distinction between nonspecific praise and encouragement is subtle, but real. Nonspecific praise often refers to achievements; for example, saying, “Nice picture” to a preschooler who has just completed a drawing. Encouragement often refers to specific feedback about effort and process; for example, saying “You worked hard on that picture, and I see you made different kinds of lines over here: straight lines, curvy lines, short lines, and lines that go in different directions.”

As can be seen in this example, encouragement also has cognitive, and not simply emotional, meaning and value because encouragement of this sort helps provide students with a language they can use to help them describe, understand, and evaluate what they are doing. Nancy Smith (1983) makes essentially this same point in her advice to teachers on how best to provide feedback to young children about their drawings.

So, with respect to building positive teacher-student relationships, Gordon (2003) gives us two methods in particular—the method of using “I” statements and the method of active listening—while he also gives us ways and reasons for using encouragement, not praise, to establish positive teacher-student relationships.

Reframing. Reframing is another method for communicating positively and for building positive teacher-student relationships. As mentioned in Chapter 1, reframing occurs when a teacher sees a student or group of students doing something negative, but first communicates something good in the situation. Doing so may be enough to get a child or adolescent to change something we normally would call a behavior problem—as we saw in Chapter 1’s example of a teacher saying “Jimmy likes to dance” in response to Jimmy’s jumping up at meeting time and starting to dance.

With reframing, the wording will change depending on age and situation, but the principle remains the same: to find and communicate something positive before setting limits, suggesting alternatives, or otherwise managing students’ behavior. Reframing does so because central to that approach is the need to change the interpersonal system that defines some student or group as being a “problem.” In using a systems approach, reframing solves this problem by redefining the situation so that there is no longer a problem or, at least, no longer a problem student.

However, when using individual-oriented approaches emphasizing positive teacher-student relationships, reframing is more important as a way to keep things positive, to make it more likely that students will want to cooperate and learn. That is, the meaning and purpose of reframing changes as we go from a systems approach to an individual-oriented approach focusing on building positive teacher-student relationships. Once again, we see that different kinds of approaches

PREVIEW

We will have more to say about reframing in Chapter 8, where reframing becomes a featured method in the classroom systems approach to behavior and classroom management.

can employ the same method, but the meaning of the method is apt to change from one approach to another.

Showing Interest. Finally, with respect to developing teacher-student relationships through communicating positively, educators do well when they mark what students are interested in and passionate about and when they occasionally reverse roles and let students teach them. Here, the marking can be as simple and straightforward as when a teacher says to a 3-year-old building with blocks, “I see you made a tower” or as complex and subtle as when a teacher listens carefully to an adolescent explaining the various strategies he uses when playing his favorite video game.

Interest is also shown in actions. For example, many teachers take time to have lunch with students and, outside of school, attend students’ athletic, musical, or other extracurricular events. Some visit students’ homes and attend community events important to both students and their families. These and other actions all show interest in students as persons.

Whatever the occasion or child’s age, getting to know a child’s or adolescent’s likes and interests and validating those likes and interests by **showing interest** can have a powerful and positive effect, as this cartoon is meant to convey.



One easy and effective method for cultivating a positive teacher-student relationship is the method of marking what a child is interested in or is accomplishing.

Review

To develop positive teacher-student relationships through positive communication, the following should be kept in mind:

- (1) Teacher effectiveness training and “I” messages and active listening
- (2) Reframing
- (3) Showing interest

Being Playful, Interesting, and “Fun”

Although students expect teachers to control the class and exercise their authority, the research on student perspectives indicates they also hope their teachers are playful, interesting, and fun (Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). However, the meaning of being playful, interesting, and fun changes with students’ age. Here is a teacher being interesting while conversing with a 3-year-old during snack time:²

T: I like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Do you like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?

S: Yes.

T: I like them with the crust cut off. How about you?

S: I like them with the crust on.

This conversation went on for a while longer, with each participant exploring the details of eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, apparently a subject that the child was or became quite interested in.

Here is an example of a teacher of older students being both interesting and playful:³

In one middle school, the seventh-grade teacher was a big, powerful man who could intimidate with his size and power. However, in this school, he was a beloved teacher because he often intimidated playfully. For example, during an afternoon break, he and two students made a film of a skit thought up by the students. The skit involved the teacher tantruming after discovering that someone had stolen his snacks. It lasted about 10 minutes, and during most of that time, the teacher chased a student suspected of stealing his snacks. As teacher and student ran throughout the school

building, the film captured the facial expressions of astonished classmates who did not know what was going on. In the end, the film became a school classic and another example of this teacher's ability to be playful and still be a professional.

Touch

Touch and physical contact used to be mentioned often among the suggestions and methods for developing positive teacher-student relationships and managing effectively. For example, in Redl and Wineman's (1965) widely read book, *Controls From Within*, they write,

We have noticed sometimes that children, even of older ages, may retain the baby's original approach to what does and does not constitute security and ego support and protection against anxiety. Thus, putting the arm around the youngster's shoulder or patting him on the shoulder in a friendly way while making a limiting demand or accompanying the challenge to "come on, take it easy, snap out of it," by shoulder pats of a friendly nature may make all the difference between failure and success. (p. 165)

As another example, one of George Scarlett's fondest memories of high school in the 1960s is being on the wrestling team and having the wrestling coaches (who were also classroom teachers) grab his arm and playfully express how strong he was. He wasn't all that strong, but the gesture was nonetheless much appreciated, and certainly it made his relationships with teachers more positive.

However, the times have changed. During the 1980s, a series of sensational trials involving day care providers accused of abusing young children changed how educators think about touch and physical contact—even though in the vast majority of cases, the accusations proved false.

As a result of these sensational trials, educators today are wary of touching or making physical contact even with very young children—as exemplified in Joseph Tobin's (1997) account of an incident of "moral panic" that occurred while he was carrying out a research project in a class of 4-year-olds:

One afternoon I stayed late, reading stories to the last children to be picked up. As I read, tired children leaned against me. One girl settled into my lap, with her thumb in her mouth and her eyes half closed, barely listening. Parents drifted into the room, calling out their children's names to take them home. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a woman entering the room who I thought was the mother of the girl in my lap. In a flash I straightened

Sensational Trials in the 1980s: The McMartin Case

In the 1980s, a number of sex abuse trials changed the way educators thought about the use of touch in schools. The most famous occurred in California and focused on the McMartin family, who ran a day care center. The family and staff were investigated and tried for sexually abusing the children in their care. The investigation was initiated because of accusations made by a parent who was later diagnosed with schizophrenia. What sustained the investigations and trial were diagnoses made by professionals not trained in diagnosing sexual abuse and professionals who used methods for interviewing young children that were later judged to be both unscientific (nonobjective) and developmentally inappropriate. Also, politicians and newspaper reporters used the investigations and trial to promote their own interests. Finally, the then-popular concept of repressed memories allowed investigators to discount the children's statements that they were never abused. In the end, and after one of the longest and most costly investigations and trials in American history, many children were falsely diagnosed as having been abused, the McMartin family was put through excruciating pain and suffering, and the main defendant, Ray McMartin, spent five years in jail—all without anyone being actually convicted of a crime because there was never the evidence needed to establish that a crime had been committed.

up and relocated the little girl on the rug in front of me. When the child ran over to greet her mother, I followed. Unsure whether this mother knew who I was and why I was there, I awkwardly introduced myself.

I was shaken by this event. A woman entering the classroom to pick up her daughter had inspired a sense of panic in me. Worse, my panicked feeling had led to a panicky reaction—pushing the girl from my lap, as if we were doing something shameful, and then explaining myself as if I were somehow suspect. I felt humiliated by having allowed myself to feel so afraid. (p. 120)

Unfortunately, Tobin's reaction is now a common reaction, and so the climate today often brings words of caution with respect to physical contact and touch, as evidenced in Vern and Louise Jones's (Jones & Jones, 2004) suggestion:

We strongly believe the professionally responsible decision is to be cautious. . . . Certainly, teachers must be careful not to touch students in ways that make students uncomfortable. . . . Additionally, teachers need to guard against situations in which students may misinterpret teacher behavior or in which the rare student may fabricate an event to obtain attention or "get back" at a teacher. One good rule of thumb is to have others around whenever you are working with a student. (p. 93)

With cautionary remarks such as this, it is no wonder that physical contact and touch are not high on today's lists of ways to show care. Perhaps in the future this will change. As the wisdom from previous eras indicates, there are reasons to hope for change.

REFLECT

In your own experience as a student, can you remember a teacher who was remarkable for the way he or she developed positive relationships with students? If you can, how did this teacher develop positive relationships? What effect did the positive relationships have on behavior and classroom management? Did this teacher manage in ways described here or in different ways?

Exercising Authority and Communicating High Expectations

In Chapter 1, we said that educators today are apt to reject authoritarian approaches to behavior and classroom management—at least in the way they talk, if not in the way they actually teach. However, this does not mean that today's educators embrace permissive approaches that place few demands on students. On the contrary, students (at least students beyond the earliest grades) and educators want teachers to exercise authority and expect much from students (Hoy & Weinstein, 2006).

Exercising Authority

To exercise authority is not to mechanically apply some management method. Nor is it to threaten and be mean. To exercise authority is to lead, and to lead means, in part, to adopt a serious and confident style that commands respect, not fear. The Canters (Canter & Canter, 1976) called this “assertive discipline,” but really what they were referring to is teachers who know how to exercise authority.

Exercising authority need not be done in negative, uncaring ways—as we have already seen in Cindy Ballenger's (1998) study of Haitian teachers. Here is another example, of a first-grade teacher, Kristen Willand, exercising authority in a positive, caring way with her student, Dennis:

In the beginning, Dennis tested our relationship and agreements. For example, during the first week, once while Dennis worked at the computer with another child, he refused to give the other child a turn. And when she

pleaded her case, Dennis punched her in the arm, which prompted my instigating the usual talk about what could have been accomplished using words instead of fists. After this talk, I reminded Dennis of the agreement about leaving the room if he hurt someone. As I spoke, I tried to be as empathic as possible, with my face and tone of voice as well as with my words. And I tried to show that I was as upset as he was over his having to leave the classroom:

“Do you remember what we decided would happen if you hurt anyone?” He nodded and remained serious as I continued. “Now I have to call Mrs. Alexander because that’s what we agreed to do if this happened. But this is your classroom, and this is where you belong. And we’re right in the middle of math workshop. I know you really like it, and you’re so good at that math computer game. And now you’re going to have to miss your time there. I am very sad that you have to miss the rest of math workshop; I hope you calm down very quickly with Mrs. Alexander so that you don’t miss anything else. This is where you belong.”

Dennis said nothing but watched me intently. Then he followed me quietly to the telephone. We waited by the door for Mrs. Alexander; I repeated to her what I had said to him. (Scarlett, 1998, p. 177)

As is evident in this example, exercising authority and showing care can go hand in hand. Indeed, they must go hand in hand if there is to be a positive teacher-student relationship.

This linking of positive teacher-student relationships not just to the warm and fuzzy concept of showing care but also to the not-so-warm and fuzzy concept of exercising authority has been an especially hot topic among those writing about teaching minority students from low-income families where parenting style is more likely to be authoritarian. As we have seen in the example of Cindy Ballenger’s (1998) teaching, some students require more toughness from teachers than the average middle-class student. And several writers who focus on teaching African American children from low-income families have made similar points about toughness and the need to exercise greater or more explicit authority. For example, Lisa Delpit (1995) argues that, in contrast to most middle-class Euro-American children and adolescents, many African American children and adolescents from low-income families demand more direct expressions of power and authority from their teachers. She explains that these children and adolescents look for teachers to command respect through the power they demonstrate as *persons*, power earned by the way teachers conduct themselves rather than power given to them by the role they fill.

It is hard for many teachers from middle-class backgrounds to understand the very real affection held by some children and adolescents for the kind of tough



For material related to this concept, go to Video Clip 3.2 on the Student Resource CD bound into the back of your textbook.

but caring approach Delpit (1995) and others are advocating. And it is even harder for many to imitate this toughness because, in their minds, toughness is so closely associated with being cold and uncaring. However, the phenomenon exists, so educators need to be sensitive and respectful when a tough but caring approach is needed.

There is, though, a danger in trying to exercise more authority in order to be tough on students from a minority culture. The danger is that the students' culture can get disrespected, and the students themselves can get labeled "bad." We will have more to say about this danger in both Chapters 8 (the classroom systems approach) and Chapter 9 (cultural approaches).

Communicating High Expectations

Communicating high expectations is something positive, not negative—assuming the expectations are within the reach of students (are developmentally appropriate). After all, to expect little from someone can be the worst of insults.

Furthermore, communicating high expectations goes hand in hand with exercising authority and showing care. For example, teacher Willand communicated to Dennis that she expected him to find better solutions than hitting when he became frustrated. Her expectations of Dennis were instrumental in Dennis's managing his emotions and, as a result, in his becoming integrated into the classroom. Furthermore, they were one reason she and Dennis developed such a positive relationship.

This message about communicating high expectations is not simply a message rooted in logic and common sense. It is a message rooted in research as well. Robert Pianta (2006), when summarizing the research on the effects of teachers expecting much from their students, put it this way: "When teachers hold high, generalized expectations for student achievement, students tend to achieve more, experience a greater sense of self-esteem and competence as learners, and resist involvement in problem behaviors during both childhood and adolescence" (p. 693).

REFLECT

Have you ever experienced or observed a very tough, demanding teacher who seemed to also command the respect and even affection of students? If you have, how did this come about? How did the teacher's being tough and demanding translate into students feeling positively toward the teacher? How did this relate to behavior and classroom management?

Review

Creating positive teacher-student relationships depends on many factors, including

- (1) age of the child;
- (2) school and culture;
- (3) showing care by communicating positively; being playful, interesting, and fun; and touch;
- (4) exercising authority; and
- (5) communicating high expectations.

Summary

Here, we saw how building positive teacher-student relationships can become the defining emphasis of an approach to behavior and classroom management. Here, too, we saw that despite there being differences in the way the teacher-student relationship is defined, there is general agreement that positive teacher-student relationships have to do with showing care, exercising authority, and communicating high expectations.

However, it is one thing to emphasize the need to build positive teacher-student relationships through showing care, exercising authority, and communicating high expectations and quite another to specify how, exactly, this should be done. In this chapter, we have tried to show that doing all three is a complicated process requiring not only a good many methods but also teachers who have the right attitude and style. There are, it seems, no formulas for developing positive teacher-student relationships because relationships demand something from us as persons.

That said, and as this chapter illustrates, there are plenty of examples of teachers building positive relationships with their students that we can take as guides. And, as the evidence suggests, doing so makes good sense because there is much to be said for good teacher-student relationships being featured in any approach. Without such relationships, it is hard to conceive of a teacher being successful in managing behavior and classrooms.

However, the teacher-student relationship is not the only kind of relationship that matters. Peer relations matter, as do the combined relationships in a classroom and school that create classroom and school communities. Therefore, in Chapter 4, we turn to a second focus of relationship building; namely, a focus on building classroom and school communities.

Web-Based Student Study Site

The companion Web site for *Approaches to Behavior and Classroom Management* can be found at www.sagepub.com/scarlettstudy.

Visit the Web-based student study site to enhance your understanding of the chapter content. The study materials include practice tests, flashcards, suggested readings, and Web resources.

Key Concepts

Active listening	Conditions of worth	Showing care
Attachment to teachers	Exercising authority	Showing interest
Boss manager	“I” messages	Taking ownership of problems
Checking in	Praise/encouragement	Teaching defensively
Communicating high expectations	Relationship-resistant	

Discussion Questions

1. Everyone talks about the need to form positive teacher-student relationships, but often what exactly this means remains unspoken and unclear. What did *positive teacher-student relationships* mean to you before you read this chapter, and how did your previous understanding differ from the discussion and definition in this chapter?
2. Much has been made of teacher-student relationships depending on how teachers communicate with students—positively or negatively, in ways that show care or do not show care, in ways that make students feel understood or not feel understood, and in ways that say teacher and students share control. Can you identify times when a teacher communicated positively and other times when a teacher communicated negatively, in terms of showing care, making students feel understood, and sharing control? Finally, can you identify times when teachers knowing or not knowing your name made a difference—when it had some definite effect on you?
3. What is your experience of teachers using touch as a way to relate to students? In your schooling, was it a common experience or was it rare? Was it positive or negative? If it was positive, how did touch work to make things better? If it was

negative, how did touch work to make things worse? What role, if any, do you see touch playing in behavior and classroom management? If possible, find out the policy on touch at any of the schools you attended, or find some other example of policy guiding educators in the use of touch.

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1. By *behaviorist*, Butchart means obedience oriented, though those using behavioral-learning approaches object to this conflating of the two, as will become evident in Chapter 5, when behavioral-learning approaches are discussed in some depth.
 2. An observation made by Scarlett.
 3. An observation made by Scarlett.