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# Positive Classroom Environment and Student-Teacher Rapport...

## *preventing challenging behavior in the classroom*

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*This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This Tip Sheet was published by the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis Minnesota and was authored by Kareen Smith of the Institute.*

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### ***Introduction***

While not every student will like you (nor will you like every student) the more students with whom you have a positive rapport the easier your job will be. This means it is necessary to show students that you respect and care about them. This tip sheet examines three vital components involved in developing a positive rapport with your students: communication, the teacher as model, and positive expectations.

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### ***Communication - how does it affect rapport with students?***

Every communicator plays two roles: sender and receiver. How you say things to people affects how they respond to you. A tone dripping with sarcasm or belting out a command will cause the receiver to respond much differently than a tone which conveys empathy and sincerity. These are qualities of "sending."

"Receiving" refers to how we respond to someone who is attempting to transmit information. Do we continue the task at hand without looking up or do we stop, look the person in the eye and nod and ask questions when appropriate? These skills will determine how open lines of communication remain.

### ***How do I develop effective sending skills?***

You will be most effective with your students if you first begin by **dealing in the present**. While it is important to document patterns and to give specifics of behavior, bringing up events from the past when dealing with a potential conflict will only cause students to become defensive.

It is also important to **talk directly to the student**. This shows respect and helps the student to take responsibility for behavior, whether it is inappropriate behavior or positive progress. Talking first (or only) to parents or other staff sends a signal to the student that you do not respect his or her privacy and that you do not think that he or she is capable of taking responsibility or credit for behavior independently.

Being **courteous** is also very important. This includes giving students your full attention when you are talking or listening to them as well as saying "please." "thank you." "excuse me." and so forth.

Using **"I" statements** is very important in communicating effectively with students. "I" statements convey how the consequences of a student's behavior make you feel. They put emphasis on the student's behavior rather than on the student.

Consider the following example. During history instruction, Jake is turning around in his seat talking to classmates behind him. The teacher stops talking, looks at Jake and says loudly, "Jake, can't you ever be quiet? You are constantly interrupting me and I'm not going to take it anymore!" Jake likely feels angry, humiliated, and defensive. The teacher could instead calmly say, "It is frustrating to me when students whisper while I am trying to teach. It distracts me and makes me feel disrespected. I would appreciate it if private conversations could wait until later." If Jake did not respond to this cue, the teacher could take him aside and say, "Jake, it makes me feel frustrated when you whisper during my lecture. I lose my concentration and am less effective in my teaching." Here the teacher is drawing Jake's attention to his behavior and challenging him to take responsibility for it. She is

not attacking him and she is avoiding embarrassing him by taking him aside. Students are far more likely to respond positively to this type of communication.

**Feedback** also helps cultivate positive rapport. Specific, nonjudgmental comments about student behavior, both appropriate and inappropriate, communicate to students that they are responsible for and in control of their behavior. Avoid comparing students. Feedback must be contingent upon behavior, which means it is dependent upon and immediately following it. It should also specifically describe the behavior being evaluated. The preceding example of the "I" statement applies here.

This is also important in giving praise. Students are often told that they are good at something rather than that their hard work and determination have resulted in success. It is important that students attribute success and failure to factors under their control. For example, "Sheila, this is excellent work. It shows that you worked very hard on this assignment and put a lot of thought into it. You should be very pleased with the result. I am very pleased."

Judging when to use **questions versus statements** is also important. There are many situations when it is tempting to use statements when a question may be more appropriate. For example, Durand has come in late for the third time in two weeks, interrupting your lecture. Up to this point, you have not made an issue of it, but now you are very frustrated at having been disrupted. It would be very easy to say, "If you come to class late again, you'll be spending your lunch period with me doing extra work." This is likely to humiliate Durand and make him angry. It would be much more productive to ask Durand, "This is the third time you have been late. What's going on?" You might find out that he has been running errands for another teacher who was unaware that this was causing him to be late or that he has to help get his little brothers and sisters ready for school and this is causing him to be late. Even if there is not a good reason, you have communicated to him that he has the opportunity to explain himself and that you can work together to come up with a solution.

At other times, statements might be more appropriate. There are some questions which students have a difficult time answering, especially in front of their peers. If you and Karen both know that she is typically five minutes late to class because she stands in the hall and talks to her friends, asking her why she is always late will probably only lead to anger and defensiveness. In such a case, taking Karen aside and making a statement such as, "Karen, it disrupts my class when you come in late. I need you to come into the room when the first bell rings" may be more appropriate. If you notice that a student appears extremely angry or embarrassed about something, asking how he or she feels will also probably be unproductive. It is probably better to suggest that he or she go work at the computer or give an errand to run to relieve him or her of an uncomfortable situation.

Finally, making **positive statements** is very important. The bulk of research shows that teachers make far more negative than positive statements. Research also shows that an increase in positive statements can lead to a decrease in negative behavior. Again, it is important that these comments are contingent upon positive behavior and are specific and credible.

### ***How do I become a skilled receiver?***

Being a skilled receiver means being an active listener. First and foremost, you need to practice being an empathic, nonjudgmental listener. This is very important in keeping lines of communication open. Even if you do not agree with or approve of what a student is telling you, the important thing is that they are communicating with you. You do not want to discourage this communication.

By giving the student your full attention, nodding, saying "M-hm," "Yes," paraphrasing, and asking questions, you let a student know that it is okay to talk about feelings which may be uncomfortable. Also, you give the student an opportunity to reexamine and clarify their options for dealing with the situation.

### ***My role as a model: How can it affect my rapport with students?***

First, by improving your communication skills in the ways listed above, you serve as a very important model for students who are developing their own methods of communication.

By modeling the behavior you want students to imitate at the very beginning of the year, you portray yourself as caring, competent, and possessed of clear expectations for your students. This can make the first few days of

school, which are often very uncomfortable for students, much more bearable. This also pertains to students who come into your class after the beginning of the year. Taking extra time with them to explain classroom expectations and to get to know them a little can make their transition much smoother.

### ***Expectations: How can they help develop positive rapport?***

Having positive expectations for all students is very important. Teacher expectations and evaluations are directly linked to achievement. No matter the skill level or natural ability of the student, all students have the ability and desire to succeed. Despite different expectations for different students, all students are entitled to your help, attention, and feedback. Be careful not to communicate otherwise by seating less able students at the back of the room or eliciting participation only from those students who wildly raise their hands and invariably have the correct answer.

Giving students cues, prompting, and giving time to think of an answer are all signals to the student that you have positive expectations for them. Research reveals that the majority of teachers only wait one second for a response before calling on another student. Monitor yourself. Give students five seconds and if they are unable to answer, prompt them. Encourage nonparticipants by asking them questions you know they can answer. These teacher behaviors communicate to students that each and every one of them is valuable and can succeed.

### ***What activities can help establish positive rapport with my students?***

Jones and Jones (1986) list many activities for developing a positive rapport with students. Several of these are as follows:

**Eating lunch with students.** Many students find it reinforcing to be allowed to bring a friend and eat in the classroom with the teacher. The lunchroom is stressful and chaotic to students as well as teachers. Having a sign-up sheet for students who would enjoy eating lunch with you in the room gives you an opportunity to step out of the "teacher" role and to get to know your students on a more personal level. (Some students might be motivated to earn lunch with teachers.)

**Attending student performances.** Many students are involved in activities outside of school, such as athletics, music performances, etc. Attending these performances and giving positive feedback afterwards communicates to students that you are interested in and care about them.

**Sending letters and notes to students.** Sending a personal letter to your students before school starts can help them to feel welcome and convey that you are looking forward to having them in your class. During the school year, letters or notes can be sent or given to the student commending them for improved achievement, particular accomplishments, etc. This can be a very strong form of reinforcement for students who are easily embarrassed when they are singled out in front of the class.

**Employing a suggestion box.** Putting a suggestion box in the classroom and using the suggestions for problem solving sessions with your students will communicate to students that you want them to enjoy your classroom and that the responsibility for this falls on everyone in the room.

**Joining in student games.** Joining in athletic and board games is fun for both the teacher and students. The atmosphere during games is less structured and the teacher's role becomes that of equal participant rather than director. It also gives students an opportunity to show skills and talents which may be more advanced than the teacher's.

**Making birthday cards.** Birthdays are very important to students, especially as they grow older and less attention is given to them. Recognizing student's birthdays is generally reinforcing to students.

**Discussing report cards, projects, or students' behavior.** This is a very important and valuable activity in which to engage students and should be undertaken in a serious and friendly manner. Discuss with the students their ideas on what the criteria for evaluation should be. Many students do not evaluate this on their own at all. Compare the criteria by which you do evaluate their work. Then go through the criteria with them and give them the opportunity to evaluate their work and discuss ideas for improvement. You may be surprised to find that most students take this very seriously and will be very hard on themselves. Be sure to point out positive aspects of their

work which they may not see or may be hesitant to verbalize. This activity helps students to take more ownership and develop more of a sense of responsibility in their work.

### ***Questions to ask in evaluating your classroom environment and student rapport...***

Rogers (1990, p. 158) lists the following questions to ask yourself in evaluating the climate of your classroom:

- Do I speak hastily, calmly, clearly? Do I nag? How would my students describe me most of the time?
- Do I have clear rules and procedures that are known and reinforced?
- Am I aware of what my students are doing? Do I encourage them, listen to them, notice their positive cooperative behaviors as well as their off-task, disruptive behaviors?
- Do I plan to cater for mixed abilities with variety in my approach?
- Do I ever use small groups or cooperative learning? (See tip sheet entitled "Cooperative Learning.")
- How positive is my discipline? Do I proactively plan ahead for disruptions?
- Do I respect students even if I dislike them? Am I consistent in my discipline?
- Do I follow up on disruptive students?

Creating a positive classroom environment and positive rapport with your students is a cooperative endeavor. It requires evaluation and modification of both student and teacher behavior. Committing to it at the beginning of the school year will pay off greatly in the long run.

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