

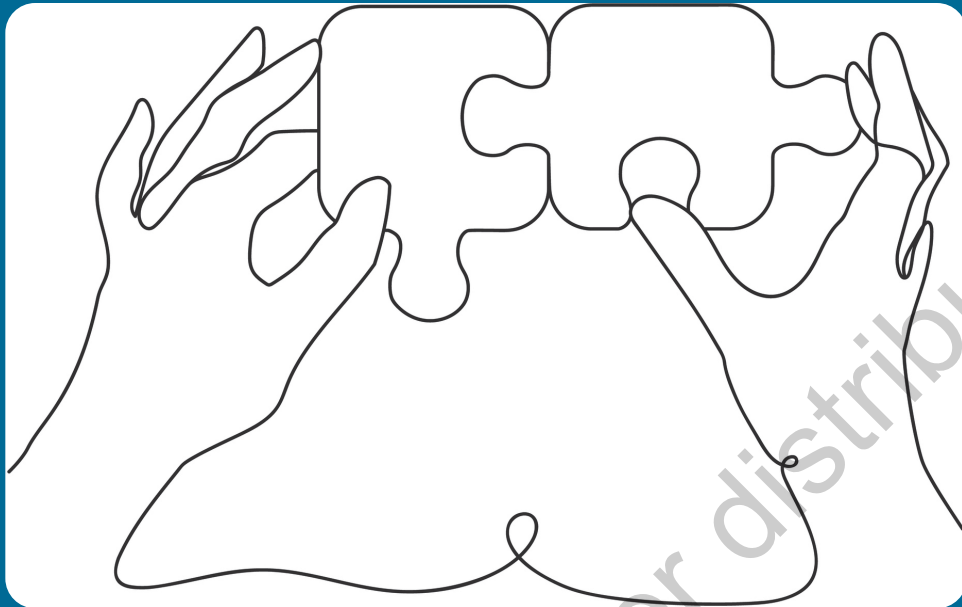
# PART 2

## FORMING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR STUDENTS

### What Doesn't Help Form a Positive Relationship With a Student

My eighth-grade English teacher put a very talkative boy in the closet to get him to stop talking, and forgot about him. The boy went to sleep and woke at 6:00 p.m. when he heard the janitor cleaning the room.

—Ellen, Age 69



Source: iStock.com/Meronika Olinyk

## How does forming positive relationships with your students relate to classroom management?

Connection is the strongest form of classroom management, but it's virtually impossible to have a strong connection with every one of your students. There just aren't enough hours in the day. In a realistic sense, positive relationships lead to a more pleasant classroom environment all year long and a more powerful learning and teaching experience for you and the students. Investing in building positive relationships with students means understanding off-task behavior and knowing how to intervene appropriately to empower students. It means they will be excited to come to your class and look forward to seeing *you*. Some days this may not be the case, however, and that's okay. Don't take it personally; it's usually not personal.

## I REMEMBER WHEN . . .

I remember my first day of finally having my own classroom. I was both nervous and excited. It was March and I was taking over a first-grade class for a teacher who had moved out of state. When I was walking to pick up the class, a parent came up to me and asked, "Are you the new teacher in Room 3?" "Yes, I am!"

She proceeded to tell me that her son Fred was in my class and that I was not to let him get away with anything. She told me that I had to be strict with Fred or he would become a big behavior issue for me. This parent was very loud and demanding, and I was honestly intimidated by her. So instead of doing what I felt was right, I listened to her. I spoke to Fred differently than I spoke to the rest of the class. I asked other kids nicely to do things, but with Fred I used my firm "I mean business" teacher voice. I gave Fred time-outs, he missed recess, and I didn't let him get away with anything, just like his mom had requested. But the problem was, Fred, in turn, didn't like me. His behavior actually got worse, and what I was doing obviously wasn't working. I nervously called Fred's mother in for a meeting and told her I had tried her way and it just did not fit with my personality. I suggested that we try positive means to change Fred's behavior. I started using sticker charts, tickets, rewards, and, most of all, just complimenting Fred on the things he was doing right. She was very adamant that those things would never work with Fred, but she agreed to let me try. It didn't happen overnight, but Fred's behavior began to turn around. He realized that I liked him and cared about him and began to try. You know the saying, "You'll get more with sugar than with salt?" Well it's true, and I learned it first-hand with Fred.

—Erika Perez

21 years' experience

Jefferson Elementary IB

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San Diego, CA



## Recognize Your Power and Use It Positively

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You can tell when a teacher trusts you because they listen to you. I actually do more work in their classes because I know they want me to succeed.

—Penny, Grade 9

There's a quote that used to hang in the back of my private teacher cabinet. It was actually the message I pulled from a fortune cookie after a delicious meal. It resonated with me so deeply that I retyped it and printed it out in twelve-point font, large enough for me to read but small enough for a student not to see if he or she accidentally opened up the cabinet (which sometimes happened). It read:

*“A teacher holds the power to single-handedly change the atmosphere of a classroom.”*

I felt as if I had discovered the secret to life. *That's a lot of power to have!* I thought to myself. I would be lying if I told you that I utilized that quote every single day, but it still is in my thoughts constantly today. I follow this credo. We teachers are the *emotional leaders* in the classroom.

Think of a presentation you have had to sit through. Audience members or students tend to take on the energy of the presenter. Have you ever felt energized after a presentation because the lead presenter was smiling, stimulating, uplifting with words and tone, and thought-provoking? Now think of the opposite. Have you ever felt drained after a monotone, long-winded, and boring presenter? We have the power to control the mood of the class. My goal is usually to make the students smile and laugh at the beginning of each class. I do this by praising behaviors I like to see, telling a

funny story, starting with an inspirational quote, or just smiling in general. Don't be afraid of not being able to get them focused and ready to learn. I believe this is what stops some educators from letting the class start with inspiration rather than intimidation.

In my first few years of teaching middle school, I spent the first five or ten minutes of class asking Kiko to stop fidgeting or Xavier to stop banging on the desk. By the time I started the lesson, I was already frustrated and exhausted! Pretty soon I changed tactics. Instead, before I started each lesson I tried to remember to glance at a simple reminder I had pasted to my teacher station to remind me that my mood and my energy will radiate to the class. My reminder was a tiny strip of paper with one word on it: *positive*. In fact, I glanced at it so much that even years later it's emblazoned on my memory: The word written in purple pen on a yellow sticky note folded in half and secured to my teaching station with clear tape. I placed it where I would see it many times throughout a lesson. That tiny strip of paper helped many days when I needed the reminder for the sake of the class. We all need our reminders from time to time. I knew if I could be positive even if I felt differently inside some days, learning would be ten thousand times easier for the students. Occasionally in my smaller classes I would tell a joke, often one from a Laffy Taffy wrapper or something simple I picked up somewhere. For example, after all of our serious work was finished and we had a minute or two in the class, I might say something like the following:

**Me:** Okay, we have an extra minute left of class and I have some new material.

**Class [whining]:** Oh, Ms. Pariser, not again! [smiling]

**Me:** How do you make a tissue dance? Anyone? Anyone?

[Students would scream out answers]

**Me [screaming back with excitement]:** Put a little boogie in it!

Some students would look disgusted and some would laugh, but either way the sound of joy was in the classroom. In ten seconds I got half the class laughing. The positive vibe was becoming conditioned into their heads. I was always careful to know which classes this would work for, and it was often the smaller ones.

Easier said than done, right? Making the toughest inner-city kids smile before you start teaching them is one example of using your power for good. On any given day we could spend the first five or ten minutes, or even the whole period, focusing on the negative. It's just easier to do. "Samika, why don't you have a pencil?" "Celia, turn around." Before you know it you'll have ten more behavior problems that you didn't have

before. Why? Where was your attention? That's where the students will focus as well. I've always thought the positive is so much harder to focus on, but it is worth it. Isn't that true in life?

## Tips for Focusing on the Positive

- **Praise the positive from the moment they step into your room.** According to author Amy Rees Anderson (2015), "A person who feels appreciated will always do more than expected." So I spend the first three to four minutes of each period solely on positively reinforcing specific student behavior, saying things such as, "Julie, *thank you* for getting started silently on the board work." What happens when I say this? Other students will scramble to take out their planners. They want recognition, and everybody loves to be appreciated. Or I might say, "I *really appreciate* how Table #3 is all sitting down. I like how Melanie's table is about to refocus." What happens? Students will scramble to sit down. Melanie's table will agree and refocus. It's a self-fulfilling statement. The trick is to never be condescending or sarcastic. Be genuine. Positive dialogue can be done with both grade school and tough high school students successfully. Nobody is too old to receive positive attention, including ourselves. We all want the same things: love, attention, and feeling like we belong.

Think about a teacher instead saying, "Orman, can't you see how Table #3 is all sitting? Why can't you do that?" That teacher would be trying to reach the same goal (seated students), right? But not only did this teacher embarrass Orman, she also set a negative tone in the classroom and set herself up for failure for that lesson—with everyone. Who wants to teach or learn in that kind of environment?

The funny thing about this trick is that you have to be specific in what you praise. Think of what you'd like your class to do and then praise the individuals who are doing that. It works. Two years ago I decided I wanted students to clap for each other. It made the learning different, more supportive, and fun. I started the next year by saying, "That was a beautiful answer, it would have been so nice if somebody had clapped." Lo and behold, somebody did clap for the next answer. Usually as a joke, but they were still smiling. Before the end of the period, after I had constantly praised that specific clapping behavior, high school students—yes, high school students—were all clapping for each other when they answered. That may be a little too much for you, but perhaps not. You'd be surprised how fun it can make learning.

- **Know that the mind is more open when it is happy.** The most successful companies know this. Google lets its employees bring their dogs to work and has pool tables in the break room. This

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successful company knows that when the mind is happy, innovation flows. Think of how you feel when you are scared, sad, or angry. Are you open to learning? Now think of how your mind feels when you are peaceful and comfortable. The mind is a sponge. Yes, students will be quieter if you yell, but I always think of this as their mind's doors slamming shut. Keep your tone gentle; talk *to* the students and not *at* them. Talking *to* the students means you are talking to connect with them. Talking *at* a student means you are talking to silence them. This is sometimes more difficult to do in a larger classroom, where you have to make sure everybody hears you. Keep your mind always on the goal: The students must learn. You want to keep their minds open. A happy student is a good producer of quality thinking and work

Once a positive classroom environment has been established, it can continue throughout the school year. The positive attitude will be conditioned. Sometimes school is the only place a student will receive praise! In some rare cases, you could be a loving adult they do not have outside of school. If the class does slip into a negative tone for a few days, all you have to do is ask, "How do we get our positive classroom back?" Perhaps you brainstorm with your class or perhaps you use your own ideas. Usually it just takes a few small key adjustments because the students already are confident they know how to be positive. However, once a class crosses to what I call "the point of little or no return," it takes one heck of a teacher to get them back. It is doable, however!

- **Sit a few happy students in the center of the classroom.** Every class has a different personality. They take on energy. In the beginning of the year, before its personality has surfaced yet, the class will typically follow the student who appears to be a leader. Every group of people looks for a leader. You actually can decide which student you want to lead the class. You want the students who smile, respect and help others with their words and actions, and eagerly raise their hands to become the natural leaders in each class. You can make this happen. (See Best Practice #6 for more on purposeful seating charts.)

I learned this trick one year when I could not figure out why one of my classes had suddenly switched from happy to grumpy, moody, and overall blah. There was one particular girl who I had recently switched to the center of the room when it all started. I switched her seat because she was talking too much to her friend on the side of the room. She wore heavy black eyeliner, and her mood seemed to match her dark makeup every day. I felt like she was not getting enough attention, so I put her right in front of me. Big mistake. My life as a teacher became very difficult for the next

few weeks until I figured out what was going on. She had a presence and demeanor that other students watched and emulated. Students, like any other people—or animals for that matter—tend to mimic what they see.

Soon, I had students to her left talking back to me. *What the heck!?* I thought. How is she telegraphing her negative attitude? Ahh! It all clicked! Just as you have the power to spread your mood all around the classroom, so do the students in the center of the room.

Now, do not make the mistake of sitting all of the positive students in the center. You'll have a heck of a time trying to control the other areas. Just sit two or three students who raise their hand and are smiley in the center and you'll be surprised how their energy will create a positive mood for your whole classroom. See Best Practice #6 for how to seat the happy and engaged students and also the grumpy students. A smile is contagious and it just works!

Remember:

- You are the emotional leader of the classroom.
- Your energy will radiate out into the classroom.
- If needed, keep a visual reminder that reminds you that you are the energetic leader of your classroom somewhere where you will see it often.
- What you focus on will thrive in the classroom.
- Do not seat negative students in the center of your classroom.



### Your Turn

1. What behaviors or habits do you want your students to engage in in your classroom? Have you been praising the student who engages in these habits genuinely? Think to yourself when you can praise these specific habits or behaviors in class. During the first few weeks, you may need to write yourself a reminder to allot the praise either on your desk or in your lesson plans.

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2. How can you make your students happy? Can you use one of your strengths for this? List three things you can do or say in the near future to put a smile on your students' faces.

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## Celebrate Mistakes as Learning Opportunities

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I used to spend the first week of school making sure the kids were quiet, obedient, and knew my rules. Now I don't have rules. We have class expectations, and I spend time teaching them, but I spend a lot more time teaching the students how to *get over their fear of making a mistake* when sharing out or presenting. Allowing for mistakes to be made is much different from how many of us were taught growing up. A friend once told me of a horrifying memory from fifth grade when she raised her hand to answer a question incorrectly and had to suffer the embarrassing laughter of her classmates. She remains fearful of raising her hand in a class-like setting to this day. Mistakes, handled improperly, can be scarring. However, by using mistakes as learning opportunities, teachers are able to arrive at the correct answers while achieving a more comprehensive and enduring learning process. We build student confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth when we redirect and encourage.

Students come to me each year with the notion that being quiet is better than talking and making a mistake. This frustrates me year after year. By the second week my students usually understand that I want to hear their voices—I need to hear what they have learned so I can guide them if necessary. I don't get angry or frustrated with a wrong answer. A wrong answer is just one step closer to the right answer. Let's look at a couple of examples of teachers handling incorrect answers.

**Scenario A**

**Teacher:** What do you think is the theme of this story?

**Student 1:** Animals?

**Teacher:** Really? *Really?* After three theme lessons you think the theme is animals? Have you been paying attention? That’s wrong.

I assume a lot of teacher wait time would be created after this response because the teacher just instilled fear in students not to share unless they are certain they are right. This means the teacher will really only be able to tell what a few of the students are thinking. Let’s look at the same example from another teacher.

**Scenario B**

**Teacher:** What do you think is the theme of this story?

**Student 1:** Animals?

**Teacher:** Okay, I see where you’re going—who can help her out a bit?

**Student 2:** Well, it’s about animals but more about humans, too.

**Teacher:** Okay, we have good stuff here to work with. So now what do you guys think the theme is? Remember what *theme* means?

**Student 3:** Man versus nature!

**Teacher:** Exactly.

It’s really hard to unlearn failure. When kids get the idea in their head that they failed at something, they carry that with them. Be somebody in their life that shows them mistakes are part of growth. It takes an extreme amount of patience and practice to do this, but it is well worth the payoff. Who doesn’t want a classroom of students who aren’t afraid to answer?



I don’t agree with everything in this video, but sharing stories can build relationships.

SAFE MISTAKE-MAKING ENVIRONMENTS	UNSAFE MISTAKE-MAKING ENVIRONMENTS
Teacher uses incorrect answers to guide class to the correct answers.	Teacher says, “No, that’s wrong.”
Students know not to shame a student for giving a wrong answer.	Students in class laugh or ridicule when student gives a wrong answer.
Many hands are raised for each question asked. Students are eager to try.	Students are afraid to raise hands.
Teacher asks classmates to help the student out when an incorrect answer is shared.	Teacher gets frustrated easily when an incorrect answer is shared.

## Your Turn

1. Think about a class where you felt safe making a mistake. How did the teacher or instructor create this environment?

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2. How did this maximize the learning for you and the other students? Why did you feel more comfortable raising your hand to share out?

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3. Now answer #1–2 for a class where you were fearful to make a mistake.

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4. What type of classroom do you want? With a partner, practice your responses as a teacher when a student makes a mistake. Ask your partner how they felt when you responded the way you did.

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## Strengthen Inclusion and Belonging for All Students

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**W**e will have students with IEPs (individualized education plans) in most of our classrooms. Students have these plans for a variety of reasons. IEPs are made so students can get the additional support they need to meet the same expectations as the other students. Sometimes students are placed in our classrooms with highly detailed IEPs to meet social goals. These are students who may be in a special class for most or part of the day; these classrooms are often called DCD (developmental cognitive disability) classrooms and they exist in almost every school. Students in DCD classrooms may have serious intellectual disabilities, have suffered brain injury or strokes, be nonverbal, or have other cognitive disabilities. Often, some of the students are in wheelchairs or have mobility limits. The beautiful thing is that they are placed in general education classrooms for perhaps one or a few classes or one elective purely to meet social goals, and the amount of time is individualized for each student.

If you are lucky enough to have these students in your gen ed class for a period of time, our job as teachers is to make them feel included in our classroom community. This is where social-emotional learning comes in. The students coming from a DCD classroom have the opportunity to emotionally grow and connect with students who are mainly gen ed. In turn, the gen ed students have the opportunity to collaborate with empathy and understanding with students who are a bit different than them. This relationship might not grow naturally. It's our job to facilitate that connection and collaboration with love, guidance, empowerment, acceptance, and knowledge.

How do we do this? Here are some suggestions:

- In the beginning of the year, have classroom conversations or teach mini-lessons about how not everyone is the same but we are all equal. Explain that some people need extra help.
- Students from the DCD room should participate and be included in absolutely everything the rest of the class is doing. The way they are able to participate might look different, however, so provide modifications and prepare other students.
- If a student has a one-on-one aide that comes with them to class, have a dedicated space for the aide in your classroom so they feel a part of the class as well. This usually works best if they are sitting next to the student or students they support but always in a group with gen ed students as well.
- If the student is in a wheelchair, make sure they have enough space to get in and out of the classroom easily. Consider this in your overall classroom design so you don't have to move things around later to accommodate them.
- These students should not be assigned seats in the back of your class or all together without any gen ed students in their groups or at their tables. This sends a message to the rest of your class that they are not really a part of your class community and can make the DCD students feel like an afterthought. Place them in the front and on the side, with gen ed students all around.
- They should always be placed near a few gen ed students to start forming social bonds. When independent work time comes and the DCD students need extra academic support from their one-on-one aides, that's the time to pull them together. They then go back to their normal seats near gen ed students when that time is over.
- Try your best to mix in some of the gen ed students at their tables or in their groups. If there is one aide in the room assisting two or three students, it's best to place those students in the same area (but not all at the same table so they can meet their social goals with other students) so the adult can help all of them without running around the room. This also gives the DCD students the opportunity to socialize and work with the other students. This is the entire point of inclusion.

If we don't take time to really include special needs student in our community, the other students will either distance themselves from them or, in the worst cases, bullying may occur. Yes, these students may look and act differently, but it's important to keep in mind that students today are much more open-minded about inclusion than they were even five

years ago. Disabilities are being normalized in today's world, and our classrooms communities can keep up. Often students just need a little guidance from us. Students may have questions and be unsure whom to ask, so they might make assumptions themselves—and we don't want that. Take time to learn more about the special abilities and disabilities of any students in your class and allow open conversation and questions from other students. Instead of focusing on the weaknesses or cognitive deficits of the special needs student, let your other students know what that student is interested in outside of the classroom. This is where you can use the help of the one-on-one aide. They spend a lot of time with this student and can provide good information for teachers and peers. Yes, you will receive the IEP for the student, but ask the aide questions about the student's personality, interests, and talents.

Questions you can ask include the following:

- What are the student's strengths? Do they love to laugh? Are they really friendly and social?
- If necessary (especially if the student is nonverbal or has limited speech) ask the one-on-one adult how the student prefers to be greeted. So this could look like teaching them to say, "Good morning, Cairo, high five?" in younger elementary grades.
- What are their vocal abilities? Can they hear well? Do they see as well as the other students? Are they sensitive to loud sounds?

Then, when the included students are working with the gen ed students, you can casually share some of what you've learned when it's appropriate. You might say to Jamal (a gen ed student), "I see you have a Dungeons & Dragons sticker on your binder. Did you know Kent (a DCD student who sits at Jamal's table) loves playing Dungeons & Dragons on his computer at home?" And boom—a connection is made. That's really it. Students are all very loving deep down and want to be friends, but sometimes they might not know how to start. It's equally important that the included students feel accepted and that the rest of the class knows how to socialize and work with people who might look or act differently than them. Students are more curious than anything, and empowering them will help create a community of learners.

## Your Turn

1. In your opinion, why are healthy inclusion practices equally important for gen ed students and DCD students?

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2. Let's imagine that healthy inclusion practices were taught and practiced in a classroom. How would this affect the students' lives in tomorrow's world?

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3. What questions linger in your mind about teaching and practicing healthy inclusion practices in the classroom?

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## Stick With the Students Who Challenge Us the Most

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I am amazed how you never gave up on me.

—Timothy, known to others as a “bad” kid,  
Grade 9, in a letter to his teacher on the last day of school

There isn't a teacher alive who hasn't dealt with a challenging student. I remember my first year. I thought administration was playing a joke on me when I was handed my roster. *There are no good kids in my class!* I thought. (Disclaimer: I would never use the term *good kid* now that I know better! This was my first year of teaching, when I thought much differently about many aspects of teaching.) Why would they give the most inexperienced teacher in the school all the most challenging kids? Were they trying to weed me out? How was I supposed to use anything I had learned in my college classes with this group?

There was one student in particular who I'll call Dennis. He looked a little older than the other sixth graders. He watched me for a few weeks before he started acting up. It was like he was more confident and aggressive than the others. Each day he had a little more attitude than the day before. I didn't understand what was going on because the neighboring teacher did not have the same issues as I did with this student. I remember a specific day when Dennis had a basketball in his hand as he lined up for my class. He bounced it and looked at me.

**Me:** Don't bounce that ball or I'll take it.

**Dennis:** [smiles] [bounces ball]

I walked over and reached to take the basketball, but Dennis gracefully swooped it behind his back. The kid had skills. Now I'd dug my own hole. I couldn't reach for the ball again without really jeopardizing my job, and he had won the battle. I retreated, fuming, and he bounced it again. The other kids laughed. I thought, *Now I am supposed to start my lesson? Really?*

Thankfully, this doesn't happen anymore. There's a way to not get yourself in this situation. We've all learned—some, like myself, the hard way.

First of all, with the tough kids, they are used to being disciplined and scolded, not valued or even liked. This is sadly what they are comfortable with. Do you want to be the same as every other teacher, or do you want to be kinder and more respectful than the others? These students will respect you more for the latter if you still stay firm with your classroom structure.

*The bottom line is that the challenging kids want to be treated like everybody else.* They want to be spoken to like everyone else; they want to be considered as smart as everyone else. So why don't they act like everyone else? This is where you have to be the adult and start the learning process of how to connect with them. First, treat them like every other student. That will answer 99 percent of your questions about them. Students misbehave for one of four reasons (or a combination of these reasons):

1. They want power.
2. They feel inadequate.
3. They want to get even.
4. They want attention that they are not getting elsewhere.

If you can pinpoint the main reason for a student's misbehavior, you can find a solution that works. Remember, *they don't know why they are misbehaving*, they just do sometimes. It's our job to figure it out and help them become successful. Let's run back through the same scenario with Dennis. First of all, I challenged him from the beginning. I challenged his reputation in front of the class. Of course he wasn't going to back down and stop bouncing the ball. Here's how I would handle this situation today if Dennis was bouncing a ball as the class was lining up:

**Me:** Hey, Dennis, I didn't know you played basketball. Are you on the team?

**Dennis:** No.

**Me:** Do me a favor please [always have the students do *you* a favor—the wording just works] and let’s hold off and not bounce the ball right now. I really appreciate it. I don’t mind holding the ball for you if it makes it easier.

Speak to students with this much respect. That is how I speak to my students now, and it is the same for most other successful teachers. Most of the time the student will oblige if you respect them, set your boundaries (I let Dennis know bouncing a ball was not acceptable at that time), and are willing to meet them halfway (I was willing to hold the ball for Dennis). At no time would this student feel threatened or demeaned, but you achieve the same or better results. Try not to use your teacher power if you do not have to. Teacher power should be saved for those special situations where it would be most useful. The kids who challenge us aren’t used to being respected and might very well act differently for you if you treat them differently than other teachers have in the past.

My beliefs about children’s behavior have changed over the years. I no longer believe there are any “bad” kids, as I did my first year. I referred to the more challenging kids with this term because I was frustrated that I could not get through to them. I later found that these students were the ones who shaped my teaching career. They were the ones who challenged me, the ones I worked the hardest for, the ones who touched my heart, and the ones who came back years later to visit. These are the students who make or break teachers.

## More Tips for Teaching Challenging Students

- Give them their space when they need it.
- Find at least one quality you like about them.
- Ask them to help you with something that you can’t quite understand. For example, ask them to help with something on the computer, if that’s a skill you know they have. This lets them show you a strength and helps them to feel valuable.
- Find out one thing they are interested in outside of school. If a student likes cars, pick up a car magazine and let them know you thought they might be interested in it. If they like skateboarding, ask them to bring in a picture of them skating and tell them you’d love to hang it in the classroom to show off their skills. Show them you care about them.
- Ask them questions about what they do after school and on the weekends.

- Don't take students' misbehaviors personally. It's usually not about us. Realize this. They are going through something, and they are children or teenagers.
- Do not hold a grudge. Start every day optimistic about their behavior.
- Find their strengths and let them use their strengths in the classroom. If you don't do this, sometimes a strength can cause the most trouble in the classroom. Think of the student who is a wonderful articulator but is always silenced. That student will find a time to talk, whether you give it to them or not. Give them room to shine.
- Don't make everything a fight. Ask them to do what you want them to do quietly and privately; don't demand they do it publicly. They need to save face in front of the class. Otherwise, they will challenge you. Do you want to take on this unnecessary power struggle?

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### Your Turn

1. When was the last time you used your teacher power in your classroom? Was it necessary or not? Why?

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2. Think of the toughest student in each of your classes. What are they interested in? How can you find out this information?

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3. Think of the toughest student in each of your classes. What are their academic strengths? How can you use this to help the class?

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# BEST PRACTICE #12

## Become a Teacher Detective to Discover Why Students Aren't Performing Well Academically

When a student doesn't do work in your class, *it's usually not personal*. However, it can feel personal to us since we put countless hours into our lesson planning. Let me break it down for you. I spent a few months frustrated that my students never had organized binders. They had papers out of order and spilling out of the sides. Our school policy was that each classroom teacher had to make sure students had organized binders. The first time I asked students to take out their binders, I almost had a heart attack. I exclaimed, "What? This is what you consider clean?!" I yelled, I scolded, I threatened detention, but still the binders remained messy. This was about the same time I was getting my master's degree in educational technology at San Diego State University, and we were studying a concept that I will explain below. Suddenly, it clicked. The students just needed time. Teachers were giving them papers at rocket speed and not giving them time in class to put them in the correct sections. They knew *how* to clean out the binders, and they *wanted* to have neater binders, they just were not given time to do the organizing. It was such a simple answer to the problem: They needed time. We all have these moments in teaching when a simple solution



This video looks into figuring out why students aren't performing academically.

takes longer than it should to discover. Let me speed up the process for you to save some time.

I've come to believe that laziness only explains why students do not do work 33.3 percent of the time. There are actually two other reasons. I used *Analyzing Performance Problems* by Mager and Pipe (1997), a text that discusses why people might not perform a task when asked or assigned. Basically, it states there are a few reasons a human being will not do something when asked or instructed to. In the classroom we can almost always narrow it down to one of three reasons as to why students aren't performing. Ready? Drum roll, please. The three reasons are lack of skills/knowledge, motivation, or resources. And here are some suggestions for how to overcome each:

- ▶ **Skills/knowledge.** If a lack of skills/knowledge is the performance barrier, the student does not have the skill or knowledge to complete the task. A learning disability such as a reading disability or a processing disability may fall into this category. In this case, the teacher can either reteach the material in a mini-lesson or tutoring session, or pair the student with a more knowledgeable peer for a specific task. Or perhaps the work is just too difficult. For example, if a student who really wants to earn an A on a paper does not know how to compose a proper concluding paragraph, she is lacking the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful. She needs a refresher or full lesson on how to compose the paper.
- ▶ **Motivation.** If motivation is the performance barrier, the person does not have a reason motivating enough to do the work or task. As teachers, we can easily mistake this performance barrier for laziness. However, the formula for motivation is value times confidence. Think  $V \times C$ . So, if one of the variables is 0, the product is 0. Students have to find value in what they are doing and know they can do it, even if it takes some help. *Value* can be defined as seeing something as important or mattering. This can be for many different reasons. For example, a student who wants to play in the soccer game after school knows he has to complete an assignment to do so. The student sees the assignment as mattering for this reason. Or a student could see value in a Spanish assignment because she wants to take AP Spanish next year and knows that she needs to learn her verbs to do so. Both of these cases add value to an assignment for that student.

In this case, the teacher could assign a grade, add on a competitive factor to the project, or speak to the class about the purpose of the task. Hint: Extrinsic motivation is always easier to use to get students motivated, but intrinsic motivation is a thousand times

more powerful. Extrinsic motivation often leads to intrinsic. Think of extrinsic motivation as training wheels to intrinsic motivation.

Extrinsic motivation can sometimes be a barrier, however. For example, a student might know how to compose a paper but just doesn't care to finish it because good grades are not a driving motivator, or a student might not need the grade for some reason. As educators, especially middle and high school teachers, we have to remember that students have so many factors going on in their nonacademic lives. Get them to want to please you. Sometimes we are a parent substitute. Our job is to teach them how to balance these factors (significant others, family drama, friend drama, etc.) to stay motivated in school.

Extrinsic motivation is always easier to use to get students motivated, but intrinsic motivation is a thousand times more powerful.

- Resources. If a lack of resources is the performance barrier, the person does not have the time or resources to complete the work or task. Help here as much as you can. First determine which resources are lacking and consider how you could provide those resources or enlist help to do so. For example, if you notice a child doesn't have time at home to complete homework, can you (and colleagues, if necessary) help them find time during the day to focus on homework assignments? Or if you notice a child repeatedly comes to class seeming tired, discuss with them privately what might be helpful in getting more rest; in this case it might be worth enlisting the school social worker or counselor too.

Basically, in most cases students either do not know how to do a task, do not have a reason valuable enough to them to do it (intrinsic or extrinsic motivation), or do not have the time or materials to do it. It can also be some combination of these three reasons, but there is usually one driving force.

Wow, really? That is it. With this knowledge, as a teacher you can usually "fix" the problem and get students back to work. Many times they will not understand why they are not working or be able to articulate their needs, but you can now use this information to correctly diagnose the issue. Let's look at an example.

### Scenario #1: "Lazy" Gary

Gary is sitting at his desk with a paper in front of him, not working. He has a pencil in his hand, and he seemed to understand the lesson when the teacher explained it, but he still is not working. The teacher goes over and says if he does not start working, he will have to stay after school. Gary gets



angry and says he cannot stay after school. He says he hates this stupid project. The teacher calls his home, the project does not get completed, and Gary and the teacher are angry with each other.

Okay, take a breath. Now let's look at this scenario from another standpoint.

### Scenario #2: "Lazy" Gary (a Closer Look)

Gary is sitting at his desk with a paper in front of him, not working. He has a pencil in his hand, and he seemed to understand the lesson when the teacher explained it, but he still is not working. The teacher goes over and asks what he needs. Gary says he doesn't know. The teacher asks if he needs help getting started. Gary says maybe. The teacher and Gary come up with the answer to the first question of the lesson together. Gary smiles, and after two more problems finds he can do the rest on his own.

It is not always this picture-perfect, but you get the idea. What was the difference between the two scenarios? The teacher did the detective work. Here's what went on in her head: *I know the barrier is not motivation because Gary really wants the grade, I know he has a pencil, time, and paper to work, so it must be skills/knowledge. I wonder if he just needs a little help.* Also, in the first example, the teacher angered Gary. An angry student will almost never ask for help.

If you want to take it one step further, this theory can be applied anywhere (even with colleagues). Next time you hear your not-so-pleasant-at-6 a.m.-on-no-coffee colleague complain, "Why can't teachers learn to use this copy machine?" you can now try to determine if this is an issue of skills/knowledge (they do not know how to work the thousand buttons), motivation (there is no reason to learn how the machine works), or resources (there is not any paper in the machine, or any time to learn how it works) You will be surprised how this problem-solving thinking can change your career into one of a teacher detective. Be careful about sharing this knowledge with other adults, however; it can seem a little pretentious if you do not vent with them about how nothing is fixable. Sometimes people simply want and need to vent, and you can just listen. But use this information in your classroom and see the results!

Why do students work for some teachers and not as much for others? The teachers they work for have tapped into performance-barrier thinking, perhaps on a subconscious level. If they know this information to some extent, they will make sure the students have the time and materials to work, know how to teach the content so the students understand it (skills/knowledge), and know how to provide students with either (or both) extrinsic or intrinsic motivation in their classrooms.

So are students lazy? Perhaps sometimes, but now you know this is only because they are not either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated for some reason. Be the detective. Figure out how to fix

the problem, or at least start with having compassion. Students rarely can diagnose themselves. Add an element of competition, use grades as a factor, or explain the purpose of the assignment (and it better be meaningful).

You hold this power. Use it wisely and see the results. I found in my years of teaching that figuring out how to eliminate barriers to facilitate the amount of energy the students put into their work was exhilarating problem-solving.

PERFORMANCE BARRIER	WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM?	STRATEGIES TO INTERVENE AS A TEACHER
Resources	<p>Student is “frozen” and not working but not asking for help.</p> <p>Student is overly talkative during work time.</p> <p>Student is sleeping during class time.</p>	<p>Privately ask student what student needs to begin.</p> <p>Reach out to parents to make sure student has necessary materials for class.</p> <p>Privately ask student how much sleep they are getting at night and if they are eating breakfast.</p> <p>Have a one-on-one student conference.</p> <p>Introduce a system where students can check out paper, pencils, or other needed supplies in your classroom.</p> <p>Hold a time management mini-lesson.</p>
Skills/knowledge	<p>Student is “frozen” and not working but not asking for help.</p> <p>Student is overly talkative during work time.</p> <p>Student is not participating in lesson.</p>	<p>Pull student into a small group instruction with an adult in the room.</p> <p>Ask your coteacher to reteach the concept in a different way in a mini-lesson.</p> <p>You reteach the concept in a mini-lesson.</p> <p>Have students reteach each other difficult concepts in small student-led groups</p> <p>Have student lead a small group of struggling students in reteaching the concept.</p> <p>If student has an IEP, and the skills/knowledge barrier is hindering the student from succeeding in your class, contact the case manager or school psychologist for strategies to work with student academically.</p> <p>Sign student up for tutoring.</p> <p>Increase collaboration in your lessons.</p> <p>Increase informal checks for understanding in your lessons.</p>

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PERFORMANCE BARRIER	WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM?	STRATEGIES TO INTERVENE AS A TEACHER
Motivation (Value times confidence; neither variable can be 0)	Student is “frozen” and not working but also not raising hand. Student is overly talkative during work time. Student is sleeping during class time. Student exhibits difficulty concentrating or a lack of engagement.	Add a competitive aspect to the lesson, unit, or project (value). Let the students know you believe in their success (confidence). Ask students to praise each other after a day of groupwork (confidence). Praise students for participating (confidence). Create a behavior/work contract for student if issue is consistent (value). Institute a full-class behavior modification system (value). Have a one-on-one conference with student to build confidence in task (confidence). Reach out to parent about lack of motivation (value). Explain to the student privately how the assignment fits into the bigger picture. (value). Be sure to keep students updated regularly on their current class grade (value). Try a project- or problem-based unit in your classroom (value).

*Note:* There can be more than one barrier, but the key is to find the driving barrier and intervene accordingly.

## Your Turn

1. Think of a student who never seems motivated. Now, with the new knowledge you have, is motivation that student's biggest barrier to performance, or is it one of the other two? Remember that it can be a mixture of barriers, but usually one is the biggest issue. Target the biggest and use the chart above to brainstorm ways to give the student the support they need to overcome it.

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2. Based on what you have learned about performance problems, what does this student need the most to be successful based on their biggest barrier? What actions do you need to take to make this happen?

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3. Do the same with another student that others have misdiagnosed as being a problem student. What different steps might you need to take to help this student?

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# BEST PRACTICE #13

## Focus on the Positive and Create Positive Students

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This is the happiest family ever!

—Emily, Grade 8 [describing her  
English classroom experience]

The first two weeks of any school year are wonderful. Everything is fresh, your classroom is spotless, you stay on top of your workload, and you have the one stack of papers from your first assignment graded. All of the students are quieter in the classroom because they do not know each other fully yet, and they are eagerly waiting for your next lesson.

Around the third week of school, something interesting usually happens. A few students in the class start to test your limits. Don't worry, they will do so gently at first. This is the nature of human beings. We all do it. The third week of school will try your patience, most likely. The key to this week and the weeks following is to focus on the positive. Students who are testing the rules should experience the consequences you have put in place, privately if possible. But overall, keep the energy in the room positive.

One of the most powerful ways to keep the vibe of the classroom positive is with your words and demeanor. Always look as if you are in control, smile, and keep the pacing going! Would an actor stop a show for one distraction? Probably not . . . although an amateur actor might. See the comparison? Have your consequences in place (Week 1 works the best to

set your class expectations and clear consequences) and follow through and use them when needed, but as a tool, not a weapon. Assign the consequences quickly and privately, and use “I” statements. Be calm, not angry. Stay in control. The teaching and momentum are more important.

Here are two different ways to speak to the class on Week 3:

**Positive**  
**Ms. Patterson:** I just love how quietly you came into the room. You really know how to follow directions. Almost everybody has their book out and ready to read. Once the last two students get their books out we’ll be ready. Amazing, guys!

**Negative**  
**Mr. Netherland:** You came into the room all right, but look at what we aren’t doing! Two people don’t have their books out? How do you not know this on the third week of school? Remember you’re [insert grade here] graders. You should know this by now.

It’s pretty obvious which teacher is going to get students to follow directions and feel good during class. Remember the mind is open when students feel good. Doesn’t that last negative example just put a pit in your stomach?

We know that teachers who have strong teacher-to-student relationships have fewer behavior issues in their classes. In *Five to Thrive: Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Creating a Dynamic Classroom* (2022), I looked into this further, noting the following:

As Karpinski (2021) writes, “Relationship researchers have shown that successful intimate relationships need about five positive-support interactions for each critical-challenging one. Tom Rath, senior scientist at Gallup, says we should target about 80 percent of our interaction time to be in positive areas—talking about successes and strengths—and only 20 percent to be in areas for improvement or difficulties.” (p. 64)

The bottom line is that in order to have healthy relationships with our students and cultivate positive classrooms, we have to be mindful about what we are saying to our students. Are we criticizing more or praising more? It makes a huge difference.

A tense teacher will usually have a tense class. A happy, upbeat, and positive teacher will often have an upbeat and happy class. Energy is way more contagious than most of us think, and it starts with us—the words and tone we use with our students have an immense impact on the classroom.

Focusing on the negative creates a snowball effect in the classroom. As soon as you do this, the students who thrive on negativity or normalize it due to circumstances at home or with friends will multiply the negativity. They will also have a negative tone. Listen to them next time. It's pretty astounding. When you have an overly dominant positive tone, the positive students in the class will speak up, they will smile, and they will raise their hands to answer. What will happen is that the students who are used to being negative will stay quiet for a little while. This tone is foreign to them. They will eventually have to adapt. They will eventually be conditioned to be positive in your presence. You may notice a vast difference between their hallway demeanor and their classroom demeanor. They may continue the negative tone with friends and/or family (although hopefully they can empower themselves to change this as well), but they will be positive in your classroom.

Listen to yourself the next time you speak. Which teacher are you? If you catch yourself being a Negative Mr. Netherland, change in that moment! We all make mistakes—teachers and students alike. The best teachers just know how to self-correct and move forward.

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## Your Turn

1. When was the last time you lost your cool during a class? Describe what happened. Was this because of one student or was the whole class off task?

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2. What was the impact on the rest of the class period?

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## Dig Deeper With Connection Kids

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It sucks when teachers don't trust me. It makes me question if they think I'm a good person.

—Jocelyn, Grade 9

Alan was in my third-period English class. The first time I had met him was actually when he was in seventh grade. I was covering a colleague's science class when Alan got up without permission, walked to the door, whipped his long hair out of his face and spit out the door without reservation. He could read the appalled look on my face as he glanced my direction without concern and said loudly for all to hear, "I have a 504B plan, I get breaks, look it up." He then walked out the door with swagger. I stood in shock, not sure what to do. I had been "schooled" by a twelve-year-old boy.

The following year, on the first day of school Alan walked into my eighth-grade class and sat down. He didn't remember who I was, but I sure remembered him. He shouted out without permission, put his feet up on the desk when he wanted to relax, and occasionally either fell asleep in class or had trouble staying in his seat. Other teachers expressed the same concern, even in the first week of school.

In most classes, you will have (cough) a student who presents a challenge. Perhaps you have several students who fit this bill. Either way, you have many ways to address this. I by no means believe any student is "bad." This is how they are thought of and described by most. I like to think of them as connection kids. These are students that, before they will learn

from you, need to feel heard and understood, like you, and know that you like things about them as human beings (not just as students). They are often challenging in the beginning of the school year because they do not have a connection with you yet. I get excited when I spot them in class at the beginning of the year. In my head I'm mentally rubbing my hands together and thinking, *Ha! Let the work begin.*

You can spot them, too. Look for the student who yells out, the student who is disrespectful to another without realizing it, etc. They are screaming for help. The trick is to catch them early. You know the students I'm talking about: They make careless decisions and have little self-control. There is a whole list of reasons as to why one child may be more difficult to teach than others. Let's call this student "the child with challenging behaviors," keeping in mind that the challenging child *wants* to be known as the good child. It's true. Deep down all students want to be known as the good student. For the naughty student, something just went wrong down the line somewhere. Every student has a light that shines brightly, and it's our job to find that light. Sometimes we have to ask questions to get there.

How to spot a connection kid:

- The student who is usually a behavior management issue for substitute teachers (this is because they have no relationship with the substitute)
- The student who has a behavior management issue very early in the school year (because they do not have a relationship with the teacher yet)

## Tips to Keep in Mind With Connection Kids

- Children who challenge want equality. They want to be treated just like every other student. The fastest way for you to lose their respect or trust is by saying their name more than others or in a different tone than others, or disciplining them directly and in front of the class. This will be a showdown even the most experienced teacher can lose. Speak to these children in the same tone and volume that you use with the other students. Have the disciplinary conversations with them privately. They will show better behavior.
- *Show* students with challenging behaviors you are not going to give up on them, but don't hold their hand. Encourage them to take responsibility for their behavior. The secret is to show them that you

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are not going anywhere and neither is your support. Challenging children almost always have instability in their family lives. Show them with your actions that you are a constant factor in their lives. Even if they mess up, you will hold them accountable and expect the best for next time. Ask them, “What could you do differently next time?” Build their thinking skills and show them you are listening. Actions mean much more than words to these students.

- Expect them to do well. Students know whether you believe in them or not. They know which teachers think they are intelligent. They will perform the best for these teachers. Believe in them. This is something you have to do internally. Do not think, *Oh, I hope Sarah doesn't blow it again on this test.* Instead think, *I know she will do better this time.* What you think will come out in your words, energy, and actions towards the child.
- The best practice I've found that works with students like this is finding out what interests them. You can even print out articles on that subject for them to read. When you find out what interests them and you take an interest in that as well, *they translate that into you caring about them and they see a way to connect with you.* Often with connection kids, you have to connect with them nonacademically first, before learning can happen. Just telling them what to do can cause them to spiral downhill quickly.
- It's important to ask ourselves, *Have I laughed with this child about anything?* Think about it: In our personal lives, how do we know we are liked by others? We probably know this because they smile when they are around us, or we laugh often together. Connection kids may need this from you before they start working for you. At least give them a smile . . . come on, you can do it!

Alan used to bring a skateboard into class. Although our school had a policy to check skateboards in before entering our campus, Alan somehow bypassed this system. He wanted to hold on to his board. I realized that I should use his interest in skateboarding to get him interested in reading. I started asking casual questions about which skaters he liked, where he skated, etc. I asked if he had any pictures of him doing cool skate tricks or videos I could watch. He started showing me pictures of him doing tricks after the class ended. He was actually really talented! I wanted to find out everything I could about his interest.

I began to print out articles about famous skaters that he read during independent reading time. He no longer slept during this time; he was actually reading. He asked me for more skating articles and started showing me videos of skate tricks he had mastered on the weekends or after school. This became our normal routine. I even snuck some current events in there about skate legislations, etc.

Shortly after this, he started taking notes in class and working with others during groupwork time. The other students started asking him about skateboarding, and he felt like he belonged more in the classroom. With his permission, I printed out a picture of him doing a skateboarding trick and hung it on our student wall. He was sheepish, and at first he felt embarrassed. I convinced him that others would like to see how talented he was. The other kids asked him to sign the picture. When our wall was full, I hung the picture next to my desk. He noticed and continued to complete work in class.

His academic grade went up, he was more engaged in class, and he felt connected to our classroom. At the same time, I also placed him on an eight-week behavior contract (see Best Practice #17) that helped redirect many of his off-task behaviors, such as shouting out and not staying in his seat. Yes, he still took his breaks, but he took them with permission, and he also completed classroom and worked well in a group most days.

Another connection kid I had when I taught ninth grade in a public school was a girl we'll call Colleen. Colleen loved makeup and fashion. In fact, she loved it even more than academics because she would do her makeup and hair during every class. I started saving my copies of *Vogue* and brought them in to her every week to take home and read. I didn't give them to her with any expectation of her owing me anything. I just quietly put a magazine on her desk before class and it was there waiting for her when she arrived. She knew I remembered every week. She would beam and yell, "Thanks, Ms. Pariser!" She then started to try her best to complete her work and participate during class. I knew she liked fashion and I respected that. Colleen took a little less work than Alan, but a version of the same best practice was used: Find out what they're into and take an interest by asking them questions. *Listen genuinely* to what they say. Then ask more questions. Eventually, try bringing them articles or items that show you are genuinely invested in their interest. Their interest will be validated.

When you do this for students they feel like you "get" them.

Remember:

- ▶ The connection kid wants to be trusted by adults.
- ▶ The connection kid wants to feel like they belong in your classroom.
- ▶ The connection kid wants to be known as "good" deep down.
- ▶ The connection kid wants to be understood.
- ▶ The connection kid is used to not feeling heard or understood.
- ▶ The connection kid wants to be valued by their classmates academically as well as socially.
- ▶ The connection kid will quickly lose trust if your words do not match your actions.

- Find out what interests a connection kid and attempt to connect through that.
- Tiny favors or recognition go a long way with connection kids.
- The connection kid is screaming for connection but doesn't always know how to initiate it.
- Connection kids who are low achieving academically often make up for lacking in academic ability by being heard and seen socially. If you can help them succeed and become engaged academically, they have less of a need to be heard in other ways.
- Connection kids who are high achieving academically are often just bored academically. Challenge them.

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## Your Turn

Think back to a connection kid you have had or worked with in a classroom. Look at the tips for how to handle these students above.

1. Which of these strategies did you try? How did it work?

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2. Were any of these strategies not used?

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3. Think of a student in one of your classes that exhibits problematic behavior. Do you know what interests them? What do you notice about what they wear, how they spend their time, or what they talk about that can help you discover what interests them?

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# BEST PRACTICE #15

## Reward Students

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I think that my actions deserve a reward.

—Dom, Grade 8

Every student loves to be rewarded, but many aren't as outspoken as Dom. If you think your students don't deserve rewards, you might not be giving them opportunities to succeed. Some teachers will threaten to withhold rewards from the entire class to gain power and a sense of authority. Be careful not to fall into this easy trap. If you do this, the students will think you do not want them to earn a reward, and that's not what we want. We need them to see that we believe in them and think they can achieve. The students should always feel that we want them to get rewarded.

Emphasize student successes. Give them a chance. The most valuable reward is one that they have to work for. Students love to be rewarded in groups or with their friends. Make sure the reward is fitting for how they performed, for how hard they worked. Make them compete against each other to earn the reward. Your classroom will have an energy to it, and students will be focused as they are competing for the prize—or, in teacher terms, they will be doing their work and learning. There is some controversy surrounding extrinsic prizes for students, but I always believe that an extrinsic prize is the perfect soil to grow intrinsic motivation. As they work for the extrinsic prize, students will feel successful and confident, which is the perfect environment to nurture intrinsic development. For ideas on how to reward students, search for behavior modification systems to see what you find. These are the same rewards I use with behavior contracts (see Best Practice #17 for information on behavior contracts).

## Tips and Ideas for Extrinsic Rewards

Here are some rewards that have worked for me:

- Whole class gets technology time during lunch
- Individual student (or student and a friend) gets technology time during lunch
- Microwave popcorn (so easy if you have a microwave)
- Whole class watches *America's Funniest Home Video* episode during lunch
- Individual student (or student and a friend) watches *American's Funniest Home Video* episode during lunch
- Bookmarks
- Teacher's assistant for a day
- Field trip
- Greeter privilege for a guest speaker
- Cool pencils/school supplies
- Popsicles (easier to clean up than ice cream/frozen yogurt)
- Popsicle party with a friend (They just sit and eat popsicles, but they love it.)
- A surprise reward always works really well (see Best Practice #52: Surprise!). Have an item or two under a box with a question mark on it.
- Lunch with the teacher (This works well in elementary school.)

*Note:* Any reward that can be celebrated with a friend of choice makes it much more enticing for students.



### Your Turn

1. What are your thoughts on extrinsic rewards to foster intrinsic motivation?

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2. Did you ever have a project in middle or high school that had a competitive edge? Did that make you work harder? Why or why not?

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3. Brainstorm some additional rewards that would be fitting for your grade level or classroom.

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## Motivating Students in Elementary, Middle, and High School, and How That Might Look Different

You'll have a hard time finding a teacher who doesn't wish for a class of students who are all intrinsically motivated. However, often motivation has to start with extrinsic factors that can, over time, foster intrinsic motivation. For some students, intrinsic motivation comes naturally, but for others it is a trait that grows and develops over a school year. Sometimes we need to give a little boost to help students develop habits that they'll carry with them through grades. Most of the rewards noted in Best Practice #15 work with older students, too, but here are some special considerations.

### **Elementary School Motivational Tips**

- ▶ Praise, praise, praise.
- ▶ Give helpful and direct feedback often.
- ▶ Hold class celebrations.
- ▶ Invite parents and caregivers into the class to read to the class or carry out other activities (see Best Practice #37 for other ideas on how to incorporate families into the classroom).

- Have show-and-tell days where students bring in an object, toy, or picture that is important to them and talk to the class about it.
- Invite students to bring in something from their home culture to teach and share with the class.
- Send out a weekly newsletter to parents and caregivers detailing upcoming events, class happenings, and what you are working on academically the following week so families can be empowered and talk to their kids about school. The newsletter can look the same each week; you just change out some of the content. Parent and caregiver involvement and student motivation go hand and hand, especially in the younger grades.

### **Middle and High School Motivational Tips**

- Plan curriculum that directly relates to the world around them.
- Praise, praise, praise.
- Provide authentic audiences for projects.
- Know the interests of each student.
- Demonstrate that you truly believe in every child's future.

## Your Turn

1. What methods have you tried that worked well to foster student motivation in elementary, middle, or high school? Why do you think these methods worked?

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2. Conversely, was there a time you tried something to foster motivation that did not work? Why do you think it didn't work, and what could you do differently next time?

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3. Do you think motivation is an innate skill or something that can be nurtured and formed through time?

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## Consider Behavior Contracts

What do we do when it seems a student has lost all hope, doesn't have the social skill set to stay motivated, creates a constant class disruption, or seems defiant or just shut down? How do you motivate them? Do you have a student with whom you have the same conversation regarding an unwanted behavior over and over, yet you see no change in behavior? You may need to use a behavior contract to redirect behavior. According to Intervention Central (n.d.), a behavior contract is "a simple positive reinforcement intervention that is widely used by teachers to change student behavior." I wish I had had formal training about behavior contracts in my first few years teaching.

As a general rule, the earlier you start a student on a behavior contract, the more successful the results. I suggest starting a student on a behavior contract in the first month of school, if possible. A behavior contract's success is all about the pitch. By *pitch*, I mean how you speak to the student about starting the contract.

Behavior contracts are most effective for students in second grade and above as they may not be developmentally appropriate for younger kids.

Unwanted behaviors that you're trying to redirect might include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Excessive talking
- Shouting out at inappropriate times
- Not staying in seat
- Making fun of others
- Rudeness/defiance to teachers or other adults in class
- Not following instructions the first time asked

These are the major actions that most teachers say interrupt a lesson. A behavior contract can and will redirect these behaviors. Such compacts are used to redirect and extinguish unwanted behaviors in order to continue with the learning.

The trick with behavior contracts is they are temporary and focus on specific, observable, and measurable behaviors, not just on “being good.” Also, *they only focus on three desired behaviors unique to that particular student*. You can see Jamica’s behavior contract in Figure 17.1 and Figure 17.2.

It’s better for the child if the behavior contract is used with every teacher that child has, but the adults all have to work together to make sure it is signed daily. Sometimes it’s only possible to logistically have a behavior contract for your class. Perhaps the success the student experiences there will bleed into their other classes. The key to success with behavior contracts is giving the student opportunities to feel they are achieving the desired behaviors on the contract.

How do you choose which students need a behavior contract? A student should be put on a behavior contract when your classroom consequences are repeatedly not working for that student and the unwanted behaviors are holding back the learning of the class.

## Mistakes and Misconceptions

The most common mistake I see teachers make is complaining about the behavior but not using a contract and just hoping the behavior will go away. Although that would be so much easier, 99 percent of the time this won’t be the case. The earlier a behavior contract is implemented, the better, but it’s really never too late to start a student on one. I once developed a behavior contract with a student for the last eight weeks of school, and my life was so much easier after he redirected his negative and distracting behavior. I wish I had done it sooner.

A common misconception is that behavior contracts are taxing on the teachers. Yes, they will take a little time, but the payoffs are worth it times a million. Your class will most likely turn into the only—or at least the first—class where the student redirects their behavior.

Another common misconception about behavior contracts is that they are only for students with IEPs. In reality, any student can benefit from a behavior contract. A behavior contract is separate from an IEP and made by the teacher, not the case manager. I suggest you only have up to three behavior contracts (one or two is optimal) in each class, for your own stability. It's too much work for the teacher to have more than that. Choose your top student or two who set(s) off the rest of the class with unwanted behavior.

I've also heard teachers say their whole class is on a contract. I guess that could be the case, but it's highly unlikely. Behavior contracts are private contracts with select students *who need help reaching your normal class expectations*. The help they usually need is *motivation* to follow the class expectations. Think of the contracts as behavior training wheels for a select few.

## Creating a Behavior Contract

*A child has to truly believe you want them to succeed, and you have to believe they can meet the goals of their contract.* That's the only way a behavior contract will work. You have to be on their side. This may take a little change in perspective on your part before making the contract.


A behavior contract should be co-created with the student in order for it to have the best chance of working. The font can be chosen together, the picture can be chosen together, the desired behaviors should be chosen together, and, most importantly, the rewards should be chosen together. This way the students take ownership. Otherwise you're just handing them a piece of paper.

It's helpful if you can print the contract on a colored sheet of paper so the student can find it easily in their binder. It could look something like the contract in Figure 17.1 and Figure 17.2. This is the contract passed down to me that was created by my mentor, Dr. Orletta Nguyen, and which I have used for my most challenging students, year after year. It works better than any other contract I've tried to use. This is just a simple template she created on Microsoft Word, and it is a mixture of many of the behavior contracts out there.

If the student has an IEP, one of the many great aspects of the contract is that there are percentages for behaviors that can be brought into IEP meetings if need be and if the desired behaviors align with the IEP goals. For rewards, I find many boys like food and friends as the reward. Girls are a bit trickier with rewards they desire, so you may have to give them a few choices. The prizes should gradually grow larger every week. Keep in mind rewards can be experiences and privileges, not always "stuff." (See Best Practices #15 and #16 for a list of reward ideas). If you have a student on a contract for more than four weeks, on Week 5 they still start on a low-level prize, the same as Week 1.

Figure 17.1 Front Side of Behavior Contract

Jamica's ENGLISH CLASS  
Contract



Week of \_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

Week 1 GOAL Percent to reach reward: 60% = 9 boxes marked with a 3, 4, or 5

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Be polite to all adults in room with words and actions	5				
Follow directions the first time asked	4				
Stay focused without sound disruptions during instruction time	5				


*\*A LOST CONTRACT RESULTS IN A 1 FOR THAT ENTIRE DAY*

5 = 80–100%    4 = 60–80%    3 = 40–60%    2 = 20–40%    1 = 0–20%

Source: Behavior contract created by Dr. Orletta Nguyen.

Figure 17.2 Back Side of Behavior Contract

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to the following contract. If I am successful I will receive the weekly prize. If I am unsuccessful, I will receive a negative phone call home. I will give this contract to Ms. Pariser at the END of every class to sign.



PRIZES!!

WEEK 1: Technology time during lunch with candy  
 WEEK 2: Technology time during lunch with candy AND popcorn  
 WEEK 3: Technology time during lunch with friend with candy, popcorn, and soda  
 WEEK 4: Technology time during lunch with two friends with candy and popcorn

Source: Behavior contract created by Dr. Orletta Nguyen.



Every Monday give the student a nice new contract. In Week 1 have the student work towards 60 percent of the fifteen boxes being marked with a 3, 4, or 5. Then Week 2 should be about 70 percent. Week 3 should be about 80 percent, and Week 4 should be about 90 percent. You're gradually changing behavior because that's how forming new habits works. You go over what reward the student is working for and the three desired behaviors. The student hands the contract to you at the end of each class period, and both of you talk about how they did that day for each desired behavior. Most of the time the student will be able to accurately self-assess what they did well and how they can improve the next day. This is empowering to a student. This takes about thirty seconds, maybe less. You hand the contract back to the student; they are in charge of it.

## Pitching Behavior Contracts

The way you start a student on a behavior contract can make a huge difference. Are you a talented salesperson? This is the skill that will help you with a contract. I will share a script below that can help.

Let's go back to the student contract shown in the figures on the previous page. Here's what I did to start this student on a contract. First, I asked her to stop by my room during lunch. You want to pitch a behavior contract when there aren't other students in the room. This is the most important aspect of a behavior contract: the sale. The reality is, you want this student to change their behaviors. You want them to *want* to follow the contract. At this point this student asked if she was in trouble. I responded, "Actually, no, it's a good meeting!" She was curious about the meeting all morning. This is what you want. If you have a paraprofessional or another teacher in that class, it's helpful if they can be there as well so all adults in the room are on the same page with the behavior contract. I had my coteacher there as well.

You'll need a solid twenty minutes to have this launch meeting. In this meeting you will not only "sell" the student on wanting to follow a contract but also co-create the contract with them using a template. Have the template pulled up on your computer ready to personalize with the student and also—this is very important—*have the three desired behaviors you want already in your head or written down somewhere you can glance at them*. You have control of what they are, but you want the student to think they chose them too. So, for this example student, we wanted her desired behaviors to be to

- respect all adults in class,
- follow directions the first time asked (this one I love because it can cover so much), and
- stay focused during instructional time without any sound disruptions to stop the lesson.

These goals are measurable, observable, and stated in the positive.

Also, have weekly rewards jotted down that you think the student may like. Try saying something like this:

**Teacher:** How are you liking our class?

**Student:** Good.

**Teacher:** Well, I have an idea. You know how you used to be doing really well in class and had a B+ average? That was really nice and I felt like you were enjoying class more. Didn't you like that time?

**Student:** Yes. [Guaranteed, she'll still be wondering if she's in trouble.]

**Teacher:** I had an idea on how you can focus more in class. However, I can't do this for everyone, so please don't tell others about it; I don't want them to get jealous and everyone will want this. Do you want to hear about it? [Basically, if she tells everybody about her contract, other students will want the contract, too, and you'll be giving rewards to the entire class. Other students won't perceive it as fair, even though it is because this specific child just needs a *temporary accommodation to reach the same behavior expectations as the other students.*]

**Student:** Sure.

**Teacher:** It's called a behavior contract. Have you ever seen one of these before?

**Student:** Oh yeah, I've been on a contract before. I hate them.

It's fine if the student says this. At this point, a student that you choose to put on a contract may have been on one before. If they have, you can say this:

**Teacher:** Oh no, yeah, I know about those other contracts. This one is different. You'll love it. I chose you for this because I think you'll really appreciate it. The reason I picked you is because I noticed your behavior has been slipping and I'd really like to see you feel more a part of our classroom and feel like you're learning something. And I think you can improve your grades, too. There are so many students that beg to be on these every year. I just can't do it for everybody. Want to hear about it?

You have to show enthusiasm about the contract. Make the student think it's an opportunity. Think of yourself like a car salesman. Your demeanor can't convey to the child that they are in trouble and this is the last resort. They have to feel special that you chose them for the contract. The student may still be a bit confused, but they are often curious at this point. This is where you want them. You now have one of your most difficult students on board.

Now pull up your computer. It's better if the contract is already ready to show them so you won't be scrambling around. If you have a document camera, you can project it as you personalize it. Students really love this. Start with letting them pick the font (any font is fine) that they like and ask what type of things they like (dance, football, soccer, even street art is fine). Put a little picture of this interest on their contract. You'll use the same contract every week, so let them take their time picking a picture of their favorite singer, football player, etc. I have had many contracts with a picture of Ronaldo kicking a goal. Now they are excited. At this point, explain the rewards first.

**Teacher:** So each day you are graded on three things. Just three! What do you think would be the best thing to change so you can focus more in class?

**Student:** Maybe my seat?

**Teacher:** No, I think your seat is actually fine. Hmmm . . . let's think. What about how you speak to our coteacher, Ms. Wish, sometimes? Do you think maybe you could be a little kinder with your words?

**Student:** Oh, yeah. Maybe that would be good if we changed that.

**Teacher:** So do you think that could be one of the things we rate every day?

**Student:** Yes.

You do this until you get the three behaviors you originally wanted, but the students will think they actually made the decisions so will own the behaviors more. It's fabulous. Spend time going over the rewards and be excited when you talk about them. Then say:

**Teacher:** There might be a week that you don't make it. I hate when that happens, but because I'm putting in so much with the rewards, we do have to have consequences if you don't make your contract points one week.

**Student:** Okay.

Go over the consequences and let the student know you really want them to get the reward every week. They have to truly believe this. Have the student sign the contract and shake hands (you just made a sale). Congratulations—you just got your sanity back! The contract should start that day or the next. So if you want to start a contract on a Monday, you should have the meeting on a Friday or Monday morning before class. It's all about the sale.

For consequences, use what will be most effective for that particular student. Here are some ideas:

- You inform their sports or extracurricular activity coach about their misbehavior at the end of the week only if they do not make the contract goal.
- You place a parent phone call home at the end of the week if they do not make the contract goal.
- You give them a lunch or after-school twenty-minute detention. Make sure that a detention doesn't turn into a counseling session or even a homework makeup session. For detentions, my mentor showed me the trick of setting a timer and not allowing the student to socialize with you or anybody else for that time. If they start to talk, just walk over and stop the timer without saying anything. They will groan. Then restart the timer again when they stop socializing with you or the other student(s) in the room. Unfortunately, we need them to feel uncomfortable for a short amount of time so they will not want that consequence again and will work harder for the behavior contract goals the next week.

One of the secrets of a successful behavior contract is *the student has to make their goal the first week for it to be most successful*. They need that taste of success. Really work with them to believe they can reach it, and they probably will. If they do not succeed the first week, they might give up on it. Then you're back to square one because they won't want to do the contract anymore and they most likely won't follow your classroom expectations based on their behavior history.

If they don't reach their goal in the weeks after Week 1, then they receive the consequence and start over on that goal the following week. They work for that goal until they make it—and they will.

If you have pushback from other teachers who say you are “bribing” students to do well, know that's not the case. Other teachers knew I was doing something different because even children with the most severe behavior problems were displaying excellent behavior in my class. Because students felt successful in my class, they were more comfortable in my classroom and also with me as a teacher, and our relationship was healthier. This leads to increased learning. You are using extrinsic motivation to foster intrinsic motivation. Your school psychologist would agree with the theory behind this contract. This is a temporary scaffold to redirect desired behaviors to maximize learning. If you take the student off of the contract after four weeks, they may very well continue with the great behavior because they've conditioned themselves to act appropriately in your classroom. Some students need eight weeks of a contract, and some need even longer. When you feel it's time to take the student off of the contract, make it a celebration. Reward them with lunch with you and tell them how proud you are of them.

## Tips for Effective Behavior Contracts

- An unwanted behavior will most likely not just go away without intervention. It will most likely get worse.
- A behavior contract's success is all about the pitch and consistency.
- The earlier the better with a behavior contract.
- A behavior contract takes a bit more front work from the teacher, but the payoff is well worth it in the long run.
- Behavior contracts are not just for students on IEPs.
- Choose behavior contracts for students with whom your classroom consequences are repeatedly not working.
- Behavior contracts are co-created between the teacher and the student.
- Behavior contracts should focus on three specific, measurable, and observable behaviors.
- Behavior contract desired behaviors should always be framed in positive words.
- Only have up to three students in each period on a behavior contract. Otherwise it's too much work for the teacher.
- Behavior contracts are temporary scaffolds for the student.
- An entire class should not be on a behavior contract. Instead, a class could be on a behavior modification system. A behavior contract is for your most challenging students.
- A student on a behavior contract has to believe you really want them to succeed for it to work.

## Your Turn

1. Have you ever used a behavior contract with a student? Did it work? Why or why not?

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2. What new ideas about behavior contracts did you learn from this section?

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3. Imagine that you have a student you are going to put on a behavior contract. Describe what this meeting would look like.

- a. When and where would you have the “pitch meeting?”
- b. How much of the contract would you have finished before the meeting?
- c. How much time would you allot for the meeting?
- d. How would you pitch it so the student wants to participate in the contract?

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## Real Conversation With a High School Student

**Student [to a teacher a few days before final grades are due]:**

Teacher, can you round my C+ to an A?